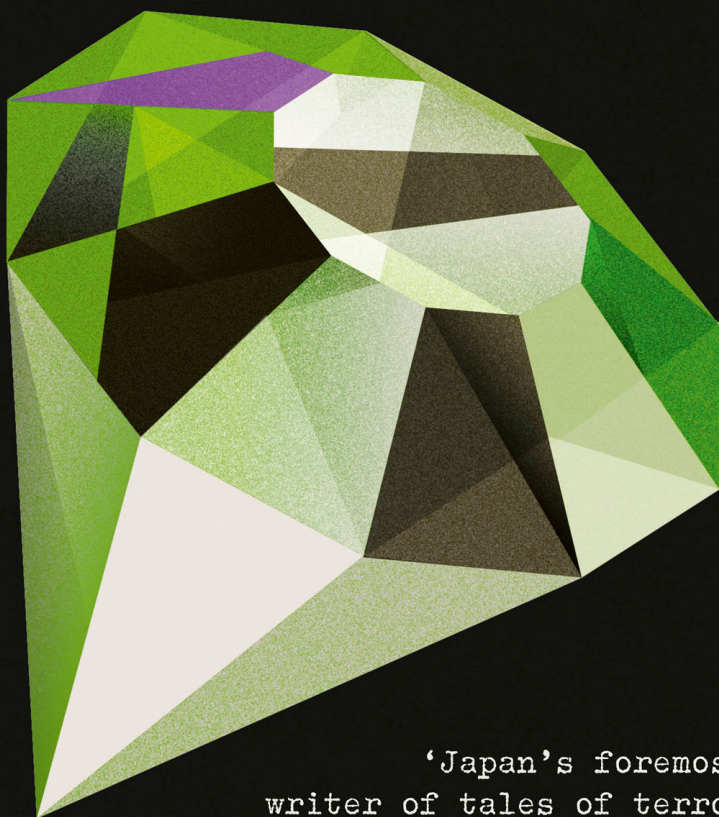




Edogawa
Rampo
The Black
Lizard



'Japan's foremost
writer of tales of terror'
Guardian



About the Author

Edogawa Rampo was the pseudonym of Taro Hirai (1894-1965), generally viewed as the greatest of all Japanese suspense and mystery authors. He was a prolific novelist and short story writer. Much influenced by writers such as Conan Doyle, Chesterton and Wells, his pseudonym is a Japanese transliteration of Edgar Allen Poe's name. Many of his works have been made into films. Perhaps his most famous stories outside Japan are 'The Caterpillar' and 'The Human Chair'.

Ian Hughes lived for many years in Japan, working first as an English teacher in the countryside before moving to Tokyo and becoming a professional translator. His fiction translations include *Beast in the Shadows*, another Edogawa Rampo classic.

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS: CRIME & ESPIONAGE

1. Davis Grubb NIGHT OF THE HUNTER
2. Edogawa Rampo BEAST IN THE SHADOWS
3. Dorothy B. Hughes IN A LONELY PLACE
4. Josephine Tey THE FRANCHISE AFFAIR
5. Eric Ambler JOURNEY INTO FEAR
6. John le Carré CALL FOR THE DEAD
7. Georges Simenon MAIGRET AND THE HEADLESS CORPSE
8. Len Deighton SS-GB
9. Ross Macdonald THE DROWNING POOL
10. Chester Himes COTTON COMES TO HARLEM
11. Dick Lochte SLEEPING DOG
12. Raymond Chandler THE BIG SLEEP & FAREWELL, MY
LOVELY
13. Anthony Price OTHER PATHS TO GLORY
14. Michael Gilbert GAME WITHOUT RULES
15. Georges Simenon MAIGRET'S REVOLVER
16. C.S. Forester PAYMENT DEFERRED
17. Edogawa Rampo THE BLACK LIZARD
18. Eric Ambler THE MASK OF DIMITRIOS
19. Josephine Tey BRAT FARRAR
20. John le Carré TINKER TAILOR SOLDIER SPY

Edogawa Rampo

THE BLACK LIZARD

Translated by Ian Hughes



Contents

- 1: Queen of the Underworld
- 2: Scenes of Hell
- 3: The Hotel Guest
- 4: The Magician
- 5: The Lady Thief and the Master Detective
- 6: One Person, Two Roles
- 7: Twilight Knight
- 8: The Detective Laughs
- 9: The Master Detective's Defeat
- 10: The Strange Old Man
- 11: The Spider and the Butterfly
- 12: Transformation of a Young Lady
- 13: The Magician's Strange Trick
- 14: The Star of Egypt
- 15: Black Lizard on the Tower
- 16: The Secret Lovers
- 17: The Chase
- 18: A Ghost Story
- 19: The Frightful Enigma
- 20: Burial at Sea

21: The Underground Treasure House

22: The Art Museum Terror

23: The Big Tank

24: The White Beasts

25: The Incident of the Dolls

26: Doppelgänger

27: The Impostor

28: Another Doll Incident

29: The Black Lizard Writhes

Queen of the Underworld

It was Christmas eve, when thousands of turkeys have their necks wrung, even in this country ... or so they say.

Ginza, the largest and most prosperous part of the Imperial City, where the neon lights created a rainbow of colours in the darkness and illuminated the tens of thousands of passers-by ... and the streets of darkness, the underground, began only a block back from it.

Ginza, where – surprisingly to the denizens of the night, and with a propriety only reasonable for one of the most famous spots in the Imperial City – the streets empty by about eleven in the evening, while at the same time the dark district backed up against it gradually becomes more active. There, along grey streets faced by buildings with shut windows, men and women squirm and wriggle through the gloom in endless pursuit of pleasure until two or three in the morning.

It was about one in the morning on that particular Christmas Eve and in a giant building deep in the darkness that looked deserted from the outside, a wild, even insane party was reaching its climax.

Several dozen men and women occupied a floor area about the size of a nightclub: one shouted out ‘Bravo!’ as he hoisted his glass; another with a brightly dyed pointy party hat worn sideways on his head danced feverishly; another acted like a gorilla and chased a frantically fleeing young girl; others cried, or shouted in anger. And on top of them all fell a blizzard of multi-coloured confetti, with coloured streamers streaming down like brilliant waterfalls, while countless red and blue balloons flew aimlessly among the choking clouds of tobacco smoke.

‘It’s the Dark Angel! The Dark Angel has come!’

‘The Dark Angel has come!’

‘Bravo! Three cheers for the queen!’

The drunken voices were jumbled together, and suddenly a

cacophony of applause broke out.

A single woman stepped lightly into the centre of the crowd as they parted to let her pass. She wore a black evening dress with a black hat, black gloves, black stockings, and black shoes. Totally framed in black, her vivacious and beautiful face was thrilled, flowering like a red rose.

‘Good evening, all! I am drunk, already drunk! But let us drink together anyway! Let us dance!’

The beautiful woman fluttered her right hand above her head, and called to the crowd in a delightful voice.

‘Let us drink! And dance! Three cheers for the Dark Angel!’

‘Waiter! Champagne! Bring the champagne!’

Presently, tiny pistols began to make bright popping sounds and corks flew between the multicoloured balloons toward the heavens. Here, there, everywhere the sounds of glasses clinking together. And yet again a chorus of:

‘Bravo, Dark Angel!’

Where did this incredible popularity of the queen of the underworld come from? Even if you knew nothing of her, her beauty, her ebullient gestures and actions, her incredible luxury, the munificent amounts of jewellery she wore ... no matter which of these aspects you examined, she was every inch a queen, but she possessed an even more wonderful fascination: She was an indefatigable exhibitionist.

‘Dark Angel! Show us the Jewel Dance again!’

Once one person asked, they all clamoured, and again applause erupted.

The band in the corner began to play again. An erotic saxophone tickled the ears of the listeners eerily.

She had already started the Jewel Dance, in the middle of the crowd, the Dark Angel transformed into the Angel of Light. All her beautiful and flushed body wore was a double strand of large pearls around her neck, incredible jade earrings, bracelets peppered with countless diamonds and three rings on her fingers. She wore no thread or scrap of cloth.

She had become nothing more than a lump of flesh, scintillating as she undulated her arms, kicked her feet, and skilfully danced the captivating motions of the ancient Egyptian court.

‘Look! The black lizard has begun to crawl! It’s wonderful!’

‘You’re right! That tiny lizard is moving, alive!’

The young men in their chic tuxedos whispered and bobbed.

On the left arm of the beautiful woman a pitch-black lizard was

wriggling. As her arm moved, it appeared to move its suction-pad-tipped feet and crawl. It seemed as if it would crawl from shoulder to neck, neck to chin, and to her red and shining lips, but somehow the creature stayed wriggling on her arm all the time. It was a black lizard tattoo, made to look incredibly real.

Her bold, incredible dance lasted only four or five minutes, and when it ended the tipsy but emotionally fired gentlemen crowded in, shouting out their excitement and emotion, lifting the naked woman off the floor and flinging her into the air, carrying her on their shoulders throughout the room with cheers and shouts.

‘I’m cold, I’m cold. Carry me to the bath!’

And as she commanded, the cavalcade carried her down the hall and into a prepared bath.

Christmas Eve in the streets of darkness ended with her Jewel Dance, and the people gradually drifted off to their hotels, or their homes, in couples or groups.

After the festivities the room was left scattered with multi-coloured confetti and crêpe streamers, like a wharf after the ship has left, and those balloons still buoyant bobbed against the ceiling, sadly.

Sitting in a chair in one corner of the room, now a wasteland like the wings off the stage, one young man was left, a scrap of litter. This man, of a dandyish appearance, was wearing a red tie and a gaudy striped coat with wide shoulders, and had the flattened nose and well-muscled frame of a fighter. In spite of his appearance, he drooped despondently, and ended up looking like crumpled waste in the corner.

‘Why is she taking so long without a thought for me? I’m in a bind! Risking my life coming here! Damn detectives might bust in any time!’

He shook himself, and ran his fingers through his frowsy hair.

A uniformed waiter wove through the streamers, carrying a glass of something that looked like whisky. The man took it, and scolded him with a ‘Pretty late, aren’t you?’ as he downed it in one gulp, then ordered another.

‘Jun-chan, sorry I kept you waiting!’

At last the person he had been waiting for had appeared. The Dark Angel.

‘I finally got rid of those noisy boys and made it back here. Now what’s this about the only request you’ll make of me in your life?’

She sat down in the chair across from him, face serious.

‘Can’t talk here.’

The young man she had called Jun-chan answered quietly, his face

still sour.

‘Because you might be overheard?’

‘Yeah.’

‘A job?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Are you injured?’

‘Nah. Wish that was all it was.’

The woman in black understood the situation and stood without any more questions.

‘Right, outside. Nobody’ll be in Ginza this time of night except the workers building the subway. Let’s walk; I’ll listen.’

‘Yeah, all right then.’

The unusual couple, the young man in the ugly red necktie and the Dark Angel beautiful enough to wake anyone up, left the building side-by-side.

Outside was the boulevard at night, like a land of death where only the streetlights and asphalt were visible. The sound of their footsteps echoed.

‘So? What crime have you committed now? I’ve never seen you look so depressed ... very unlike you, Jun-chan.’

The woman in black started the conversation.

‘I killed them.’

Jun-chan kept his eyes on the pavement and spoke in an eerie quiet tone.

‘Who?’

The Dark Angel did not appear to be especially upset by this sudden announcement.

‘My rival. That son of a bitch Kitashima and his slut, Sakiko.’

‘So, it finally came to that ... where?’

‘In their apartment. The bodies are stuffed in the closet. They’ll be discovered tomorrow morning, no question about it. Everyone knows about the three of us, and the deskman at the apartment house knows I was there tonight. If they catch me, it’s all over. I want to stay on the outside!’

‘Are you thinking of making a run for it?’

‘Hmm ... My lady, you always call me your benefactor.’

‘Yes. You saved me from a very dangerous situation, and I’ve been in love with your sheer brawn since.’

‘Return the favour. Lend me enough to get away, make the jump ... a hundred thousand yen.’

‘Well, a hundred thousand is simple, but you think you can get away? No way. They’ll nab you while you’re waiting on some wharf in Kobe or Yokohama. The worst thing you can do is just throw everything away and start running.’

The woman in black spoke as if she was very familiar with the situation.

‘So you say I should hide here in Tokyo?’

‘Yes, I think that’s a much better option. Even so, it’s still dangerous. We need an even better way ...’

She stopped in thought, and suddenly asked an unexpected question.

‘Your apartment is on the fifth floor, right?’

‘Well, yeah, but so what?’ he answered, irritated.

‘Oh, wonderful!’ The word escaped from her beautiful lips as if she was astonished. ‘There’s a perfect solution! Couldn’t have asked for a better one! Jun-chan, I’ve got the perfect way to make you safe.’

‘What? Hurry up and tell me!’

The Dark Angel gave a thin, mysterious smile, and powerfully uttered one word at a time as she stared into his pale face.

‘You’re going to die. I’m going to murder the man known as Amamiya Jun.’

‘Wha—? What?’

The young man stood, with his mouth flapping open, as he stared at the queen of the underworld.

Scenes of Hell

As Amamiya Jun'ichi was waiting in the appointed place in Kyōbashi for the woman in black, an automobile stopped in front of him. The young driver, dressed in a black suit and deerstalker, beckoned him from the window.

'Don't need a ride!' said Amamiya, waving the car away while thinking to himself it was pretty luxurious for a taxi.

'It's me! It's me!' called a woman's voice, laughing. 'Hurry up and get in!'

'M'lady? You can drive?'

Amamiya was astonished when he realized that the Dark Angel of the Jewel Dance had metamorphosed into a suit-attired man and driven to pick him up in only ten minutes. He'd been with her for over a year now, but even he did not know much about the real her.

'How condescending! Of course I can drive. Don't stand there with that silly look on your face; hurry up and get in! It's 2:30. If we don't hurry it'll be light soon.'

Still somewhat bewildered, Jun'ichi got into the passenger seat and the car shot down the dark empty avenue like an arrow.

'What's this huge bag for?' he asked the driver, noticing an enormous cotton bag lumped on the seat.

'That bag is going to save your life,' laughed the beautiful driver, flashing him a smile.

'Something is weird here. Where are we going, and what are you doing? This don't feel right ...'

'Do I hear the hero of Ginza whining? You promised you wouldn't ask me anything, remember? Are you saying you don't trust me?'

'No, I trust you all right ...'

No matter what he said after that, the driver kept her eyes fixed ahead and made no answer.

The car swept around the large pond in Ueno Park, and up a slope to stop in a curiously deserted spot, empty of houses, with a long, long wall running along the road.

‘Jun-chan, you have gloves, right? Take off your coat and put your gloves on. Do up all your jacket buttons, and pull your hat down,’ commanded the beauty dressed as a man as she turned off the headlights, running lights and cabin light.

There were no streetlamps outside and it was pitch black. In the darkness the car stood, blind, all lights off and the engine stopped.

‘Right, bring your gloves and follow me,’ she said.

Jun’ichi followed her directions and got out of the car. The beautiful woman in black, collar flipped up like a thief in the night, was also wearing gloves, and grasped his own gloved hand, pulling him through an open gate.

They passed under countless giant trees hiding the sky, and cut across a huge empty field. Then they went along the side of a large Western-style building. The streetlamps of the city were sometimes visible, flashing like fireflies in the distance, but ahead of them was only darkness.

‘M’lady, isn’t this the Tokyo University campus?’

‘Shh! Quiet,’ she warned, squeezing his hand. In the freezing cold, his hand felt sweaty in her warmth through the two gloves. Right now, though, the murderer Amamiya Jun’ichi did not have the time to be aware of her as a woman.

As they continued to walk through the darkness, the anger of two or three hours ago was reborn. He saw once again his former lover Sakiko as he throttled her, the tongue sticking out between her teeth and blood dripping from the corner of her mouth, as her huge, cow-like eyes looked at him piercingly. Her fingers clawed the air in her death throes, a phantom sweeping through the air in front of him, threateningly.

After a little while, they saw ahead of them a low, red-brick Western-style building standing in a large open space, surrounded by a battered slat fence.

‘It’s inside,’ said the woman in black in a low voice, fumbling for the gate lock. It seems she had a duplicate key, because suddenly the gate rattled open.

They entered and closed the gate, and then she finally turned on the flashlight she had been carrying, using it to illuminate the ground as they walked to the building. The ground was covered with dry grass,

and Jun'ichi felt as if they were about to enter a deserted, haunted house.

Up three stone steps was a porch and balustrade with peeling white paint. They crunched over pieces of fallen plaster, and a few metres beyond was an old but sturdy door.

The door rattled as she opened it with another duplicate key, and then unlocked yet another similar door just inside. Beyond it spread an empty room. The powerful smell of disinfectant assaulted him, like the smell of a surgery, but mixed with a queerly sweet odour.

'We're here. Jun-chan, no matter what you see, do not raise your voice. There shouldn't be anyone inside the building, but every so often a watchman walks by the fence outside,' she whispered, almost threatening.

Fighting against an inexplicable fear, young Amamiya could do nothing but stand stock still. He wondered just where this brick building, this haunted house was. What was that bizarre smell? And what was in this huge, empty space that sounded as if it would echo his voice from all four walls?

In the darkness the terrifying death masks of the dying Kitashima and Sakiko came again, overlaid nauseatingly on the blackness. '*Am I wandering the paths of Hell, ushered by their angry shades,*' he wondered ... he felt himself in the grip of a queer illusion he had never experienced before, and his body was covered in greasy sweat.

The disk of light from the flashlight in her hand crawled across the floor, as if searching for something.

The floorboards, rough, passed under the circle of light, with no carpet to hide them. A solid desk-like object, varnish peeling, gradually crawled into the light from the legs up. It was a long, large table. Ah! a person. The legs of a person. Someone was sleeping here?

Still, they looked like the legs of an awfully old person. And why was there a little wooden tag tied to the ankle?

Hey, this old man is sleeping naked, in spite of this cold!

The circle of light moved from thighs to belly, then on to the ribs and chest, travelling on to illuminate a neck like a chicken's leg, the fallen jaw, and the gaping, black, foolish mouth with exposed teeth, and cloudy glass balls that were eyes ... it was a corpse.

Jun'ichi shuddered at the eerie juxtaposition of the spectres that had been haunting him and the thing that had appeared in the circle of light. Still upset at the enormity of his crime, still unaware of where this room was located, he wondered if he had gone insane, or was

trapped in a nightmare.

But when the next object came into the glow of the flashlight, he totally forgot the woman in black's warning, and let out a shout of surprise.

This was surely a scene from Hell itself! A large tub, maybe two metres on a side, was filled with a pile of naked corpses: young, old, male, female.

Could this scene, just like the ancient pictures of the damned squirming in the pools of blood in Hell, be a part of this world?

'Jun-chan, you're a scaredy cat. There's nothing to be surprised at! This is where they keep the bodies for dissection in anatomy class. All the medical schools have them.'

The woman in black gave a bold laugh that admitted no fears, no enemies.

'Oh, is that all,' he thought to himself. *'So we are at the university. Even so, why in the world are we here in this creepy place!?'* He may have been a criminal, but Jun'ichi could only stare in astonishment at the totally unexpected actions of his beautiful companion.

The circle of light slowly traced over the entire mountain of bodies, and finally stopped on the naked corpse of a young man.

The young man lay motionless in the darkness, his yellow flesh exposed, in a picture drawn by a spectral light.

'This one'll do,' the woman in black whispered, holding the light steady on the young man's body. 'This lad was a patient in the Kyoritsu Mental Hospital, and just died yesterday. The hospital and this medical school have an agreement. As soon as someone dies there the corpse is brought here. The person in charge of this room is a friend of mine ... let's say, an underling, shall we? That's why I knew this body would be here. What do you think? About the corpse?'

'About the corpse?' he repeated, flustered. What in the world was she thinking?

'The height and musculature are about the same as yours, aren't they? Only the face is different.'

Now that she mentioned it, he noticed that it looked about the same age, the same size, as himself.

'Of course!' he thought to himself. *'She's going to use this corpse to take my place! Damn, she looks so refined and oh-so-beautiful, but she thinks up such bold and terrible plans!'*

'You see now, don't you? What do you think? Brilliant, isn't it? A sorceress, aren't I? After all, we're going to make a person vanish from

this world, and we'll need pretty powerful magic to accomplish that, won't we? Right, out with the bag. Sorry, it'll be a bit disgusting, but we have to stuff this guy into the bag and carry him to the car.'

Jun'ichi found his 'saviour' even more terrifying than the corpse. Who was she? Even if she was just a spoilt rich woman enjoying idle games, this plan was too detailed, too careful. She called the person in charge of the dissection bodies her 'underling', didn't she? If she had an underling in such a place as this university, she must be a pretty big – and bad – wig indeed!

'Jun-chan, what in the world are you mooning about? Hurry up with the bag!'

Her voice prodded him from the darkness. Pressured by the voice, his mind curiously stunned and quiet, like a mouse transfixed by the gaze of a cat, he felt himself move to do her bidding.

The Hotel Guest

The Keiō hotel, the ritziest in Imperial Tokyo, also hosted a grand gala for hotel guests and visitors that night, but even those who had danced through the witching hour had trundled off to bed by now, and the doormen were trying to keep their nodding heads up. At about five in the morning, before dawn, a single car pulled up in front of the swinging door.

Mme Midorikawa had returned.

The doormen all loved this beautiful woman, and when they noticed whose car it was, they competed with each other to be first to open the door.

Wrapped in furs, Mme Midorikawa stood for a moment, and then a man stepped out and joined her. An older man, maybe about forty, with a stiff, pointed moustache, dark goatee, and large horn-rimmed spectacles. His thick, heavy coat with collar did not completely hide the striped formal pants he was wearing, making him look like, perhaps, a politician.

‘This is a friend of mine,’ announced Mme Midorikawa to the hotel manager, who was waiting at the front desk. ‘The room next to mine was free, I believe? Please arrange for him to stay there.’

‘Yes, it is still open. Of course!’ he replied, delighted to help, and ordered one of the clerks to take care of it.

The bearded man signed his name in the guest book, without speaking, and followed Mme Midorikawa into the front hallway. His signature read Yamakawa Kensaku.

Now that the booking was settled, they bathed in their separate rooms, and then rejoined each other in her bedroom.

Kensaku wore his trousers and shirt only, not having donned the jacket again. As he rubbed his hands together, he spoke in an almost childish voice that seemed at odds with his stern expression.

‘Ah, I can’t stand it! That smell is still on my hands! M’lady, that was the first time I have ever done anything so, so, horrible!’

‘My, melodramatic, aren’t we? And after murdering two people!’ she chuckled.

‘Please! Don’t just say things like that! Someone might hear it in the hall!’

‘Don’t worry. Who could hear so low a voice?’

‘Ahh, it almost makes me sick just to think of it,’ shuddered Kensaku. ‘I felt terrible when we smashed the face of that corpse just now at my apartment. And when we dumped the body into the elevator shaft ... and that terrible spattering noise ... ugh! I can’t stand it!’

‘Weakling. Don’t think about things that are over. You died there! I’m talking to Yamakawa Kensaku, a fine and upstanding scholar. Snap out of it!’

‘But will it really work? Nobody will notice that a body has vanished from the university?’

‘What in the world?! You think I wouldn’t notice something that important? I said the person in charge was my underling, remember? You think one of my people would commit such a gross error? The school is on holiday now; no students or faculty are there at all. All my person has to do is just fiddle the books a little. Nobody remembers the face of a corpse, and nobody would ever notice one less cadaver in that pile ... except my man, of course.’

‘So you’ll have to tell him about what happened tonight, then.’

‘Yes. All I have to do is make a phone call a bit later this morning ... To change the subject, Jun-chan, there’s something I want to talk to you about. Come sit here.’

She was wearing a brilliantly coloured *yuzenzome* kimono with long, hanging sleeves. Sitting on the bed, she pointed at the sheet next to her, and invited him over.

‘This beard and spectacles are obnoxious! Is it all right if I take them off?’

‘Of course. The door’s locked, so it will be safe.’

And so, like young lovers, they sat together on the edge of the bed, talking.

‘Jun-chan, you’re dead. Do you understand what that really means? This brand-new person sitting next to me is just like my baby, someone I have given birth to. You cannot refuse any command of mine, ever again.’

‘And if I should?’

‘I’ll kill you. You know I’m a sorceress, and a terrible one at that. Yamakawa Kensaku is my doll. And since you have no records, no registry in this world, there’s nobody to complain should you suddenly vanish. The police can’t do anything, and won’t. I got a new doll today: you, with your oh-so-strong arms. Rather than a doll, you could say a slave. My slave.’

Jun’ichi was totally under her enchantment, and did not feel the slightest bit upset about what she said. In fact, he felt a curiously familiar and sweet emotion.

‘Yes, I will become the queen’s slave,’ he said. ‘I’ll do whatever you command. I’ll kiss the soles of your shoes. All I ask is that you do not discard this child you have birthed. Don’t throw me away!’

He placed his hands on her lap, covered with beautiful *yuzen* patterns, and pleaded, almost crying. The Dark Angel smiled gently, wrapped her arms around Jun’ichi’s broad shoulders, and gently patted him on the back, as if reassuring a child. She felt the hot droplets on her lap, through the fabric.

‘Ha, ha, ha! Look at us! Getting so sentimental! That’s enough, don’t you think? We’ve something important to discuss.’

She unwrapped her arms.

‘Who do you think I am? You don’t have the faintest idea, do you?’

‘It doesn’t matter. I don’t care if you’re a thief, or even a murderer. I’m just your slave.’

‘Oh, my, right on the button, aren’t we?’ she laughed. ‘That’s right. I’m a thief. And I may have murdered a few people, too.’

‘Huh? You?!’

She laughed again.

‘Just as I thought. I figured that’d surprise you! You have nothing to worry about, though, because you’ve entrusted me with your life. I’m sure you wouldn’t try to run away. Would you?’

‘I am your slave,’ he said, as his fingers dug powerfully into her lap.

‘Oh, you say the cutest things. From today, you’re one of my underlings. You’ll have plenty to do.’

‘Do you have any idea why I’m staying at this hotel? I’ve been using this room for the past four or five days, under the name of Mme Midorikawa. The reason is that my mark is staying at the same hotel. It’s a big, big job, and just as I was feeling a little underpowered to take it on, just look! You come along, with perfect timing!’

‘Someone rich?’

‘Yes, rich, but I’m not after the money. I collect the most beautiful

things in the world: jewels, art, beautiful people ...'

'Excuse me? People?'

'That's right. Beautiful people are ever so much more beautiful than art. My mark is a beautiful girl from Osaka, here together with her father.'

'And you plan to steal his daughter?'

He was, once again, bewildered by the unpredictable things the Dark Angel said.

'That's right. It's not just kidnapping a girl, though. I plan to use her as bait to get hold of the largest diamond in Japan, which her father happens to possess. He's a leading jewel merchant in Osaka.'

'That would be Iwase Trading?'

'Oh, very good! And President Iwase Shōbei is staying at this hotel. The minor problem is that he is accompanied by that private detective, Akechi Kogorō.'

'Um. Akechi, huh?'

'Not someone you take on lightly. Fortunately he knows nothing about me, but Akechi just drives me crazy!'

'Wonder why he hired a private eye? Maybe he noticed something?'

'I gave him a few things to notice. You see, Jun-chan, I dislike attacking when people are unprepared. I've never stolen anything without giving notice. I warn them, wait for them to arrange protection, and then fight on an equal basis, otherwise it's not interesting. Rather than the spoils, it's the thrill of the fight that makes it worthwhile.'

'So you gave him warning, then?'

'Yes, in Osaka. Oh, I'm so excited! Akechi Kogorō is an opponent worthy of me! When I think of taking him on in single combat like this, I'm so happy! Jun-chan, don't you agree how wonderful it is?'

Growing intoxicated by herself and her words, she took Jun'ichi's hands, squeezing them and swinging them in her fevered excitement.

The Magician

In the space of an evening, Jun'ichi completely immersed himself in the role of Yamakawa Kensaku and when he had finished dressing the following morning he looked just like a physician – an impression aided by his horn-rimmed spectacles and false beard.

And he was faultless both in word and gesture as he took his porridge opposite Mme Midorikawa in the hotel dining room.

After finishing his meal, he returned to the room to find a hotel clerk waiting.

'Sir, some luggage has just arrived for you. Would you like me to bring it here?'

This was the first time in his life Jun'ichi had been addressed with such respect, but he did his best to remain calm and answered with gravitas, 'Yes, bring it would you.'

As part of the plans drawn up the previous evening, they had arranged for a large trunk to be delivered in his name the following morning.

A little while later, the clerk and a porter brought a large wood-ribbed trunk into the room.

'Your performance is improving all the time. I'm sure you'll be fine now. Not even Akechi Kogorō could see through you.'

After confirming that the pair had left, Mme Midorikawa had entered from the adjoining room.

'Hah! I guess I wasn't too bad, was I? But what's inside this huge trunk?'

He hadn't been told its purpose yet.

'Here's the key. Why don't you open it?'

Taking the key, the magnificently bearded underling put his head to one side quizzically.

'My attire by any chance? It would be strange if such a personage as

Mr Yamakawa had no change of clothes ...'

'Ha, ha. Maybe you're right.'

He turned the key and lifted the lid. Inside were many layers of tightly packed objects thickly wrapped in rags.

'Hah!? What's this?'

He whispered, realizing his guess had been wide of the mark as he gingerly unwrapped one of the objects.

'Hey, this is a rock, isn't it? Are all these other carefully bound objects rocks too?'

'That's right. No change of clothes for you, I'm afraid. They're all rocks. The trunk had to have a little weight.'

'Weight, you say? ...'

'Mmm, exactly the weight of one person. Stuffing the trunk full of rocks might seem pointless, but think about it. We can easily dispose of this stuff. The stones we can throw out of the window onto the ground and if we put the rags between the bed base and the mattress the trunk will be empty with nothing left over. Just a little magic trick.'

'Oh, I see. But once you've emptied the trunk, what will you put inside it?'

'Ha, ha, ha! It's pretty clear what is usually put in trunks, isn't it? Anyway, come on, help me get rid of these pebbles.'

Located in the recesses of the hotel on the ground floor, his room had a window that gave onto a small secluded inner garden covered with coarse gravel. The perfect place for them to throw the rocks. They ditched the stones quickly and disposed of the rags.

'Right, now it's completely empty. Next I'll show you how magicians use trunks, shall I?'

Looking laughingly at the surprised Jun-chan, Mme Midorikawa quickly locked the door, pulled down the window blind to prevent any prying, and suddenly began to remove her black dress.

'This is a little strange isn't it, m'lady? You're not about to perform that dance, are you?'

'Ha, ha, ha. You're frightened!'

As she laughed, her hands removed each layer of clothing without pause. That peculiar malady was upon her. The exhibitionism was starting.

Even the most delinquent of youths would blush and fidget in the face of this beautiful stark naked woman. Next, the bright, beautiful lump of peach-coloured and pleasingly curved flesh stood before him in a shockingly frank pose.

Try not to look as he might, his gaze went toward her. And when his eyes met hers, he blushed even more. Whatever the pose she struck in front of her slave, the queen remained composed and without a trace of embarrassment. Unable to endure the stimulation and sweating nervously, it is always the slave who cries out.

‘My! What a fluster you are in! Is the sight of a naked person such a rarity for you?’

Unabashedly revealing to him various curves and deep shadows, she straddled the trunk’s edge, then pulled up her arms and legs so that her whole body fitted inside, just like a baby in the womb.

‘This is it, my lad – the way my magic trick works. What do you think, sweet? How do I look?’

Curled up in the trunk, the flesh-mound spoke in a mish-mash of mannish and girlish words.

The knees of her bent legs pressed so tightly as to appear stuck to her breasts, while the skin near her hips was drawn tight and her rump jutted out oddly. Her hands were crossed behind her head, ruffling her hair and leaving her armpits completely exposed. An unusually shaped being, rounded, peach-coloured, and a very beautiful colour indeed.

Growing bolder, Jun-chan/Yamakawa leaned over the trunk and looked down at the body lasciviously.

‘So it’s a beauty stuffed into a trunk then, is it, m’lady?’

‘Ha, ha, ha. Indeed it is. Here and there, the trunk has little ventilation holes that cannot be seen from outside. So there’s no need to worry about suffocation if the lid is closed.’

No sooner had she said this than she slammed the lid shut, sending up into the excited young man’s face a billow of warm air filled with the scent of her body. Once the lid had been closed, all that could be seen was a plain, black rectangular trunk. No one would have imagined that hidden inside was a mound of sexy, amply rounded peach-coloured flesh. This stark contrast explains why, from ancient times, conjurors have used an unattractive trunk and a beautiful woman’s body.

‘What do you think? No one would suspect that a person might be inside.’

Having slightly opened the trunk’s lid, she sought his agreement with a smile, looking much like Venus appearing from within the shell.

‘Oh! So you ... I mean, you intend to put that jeweller’s daughter in this trunk and kidnap her?’

‘Yes. Of course. You’ve finally worked it out, have you? I was only

providing you with a little simulation.'

After she had put her clothes back on, she filled him in on the details of her daring kidnap plan.

'Putting that girl into the trunk as I've just shown you is my job and I've got everything prepared, including the knock-out drops. Getting the trunk away from here is your job – that'll be your first big test.

'You make it appear that you are catching the 9:20 train leaving Tokyo tonight and have the hotel purchase a ticket beforehand and then leave the hotel with the trunk. The hotel porter checks it in as hand luggage and sees you board the train. So, everyone will think you have gone to Nagoya, but you actually get off the train at Shinagawa Station, the first stop. Are you getting this? You disembark at Shinagawa – of course you have the trunk offloaded too – tell the guard you've remembered some urgent business or something. It might be somewhat arduous work, but I'm sure you won't make any mistakes. Next, you return by taxi to Tokyo with the trunk and you go to the Meiji Hotel. Make them think you're a rich man – act confident, choose the best room and check in. I'll check out of here tomorrow and meet you at the Meiji. What do you think of my plan?'

'Well, it's certainly interesting. But I'm not entirely sure about fooling everyone. I'll probably feel pretty insecure all by myself.'

'Ha, ha, ha. You've killed people and yet you're behaving like some nervous rich kid. Don't worry! The safest way to carry out something bad is to do it confidently and in full view – and not secretly and quietly. If you're found out, you can just get rid of the luggage and run for it! It's a breeze compared to murdering someone.'

'But couldn't you come with me?'

'I have to take on Akechi Kogorō. Who knows what might happen if I don't keep a watch on him until you make it through!? My task is to hold back that interfering detective. And that will probably be much harder than transporting the trunk.'

'Oh, I see. Yes, that will make me feel safer. But ... you'll be sure to come to the Meiji Hotel tomorrow morning, won't you? If the girl wakes up before and starts kicking up a fuss inside the trunk I'll be in a real fix!'

'You do worry about the small stuff, don't you? Well, I suppose that's where slip-ups can happen. We'll gag the girl and tie her arms and legs very tightly. When the knock-out drops wear off, she won't be able to speak or even to move.'

'Oh, my head doesn't seem to be working normally today. It's

because you put on that display. In future, please spare me that at least, would you? I'm just a young man, you know. I'm still all excited! Ha, ha, ha! Anyway, what happens after we meet up at the Meiji?'

'What happens then is top secret. That's not something underlings need to ask about. You just keep quiet and follow orders.'

And thus was the kidnapping of the young lady organized right down to the last detail.

The Lady Thief and the Master Detective

That night, there was a lively atmosphere in the hotel's spacious lounge as guests chatted or smoked for a while after dinner. A radio in the corner of the room murmured out the evening news. Here and there, gentlemen leaned back into soft cushions with evening editions of the newspapers spread wide before their faces. The high-pitched voice of an American lady could be heard from a group of foreigners around one table.

Among the guests were Iwase Shōbei and his daughter Sanae. Large for her age, she stood out in the lounge because she was one of the few wearing Japanese clothing – a kimono with bright yellow stripes, a sash shot with shiny silver thread, and an orange *haori* shawl. It was not only her clothes. The calm and composed young lady also caught the eye for the frameless spectacles, apparently prescribed for myopia, that she wore in front of her white, almost translucent, face.

Stout, clean-shaven and with a greyish bald pate, her father had the appearance of a merchant of some importance. He followed her every movement very closely, as though guarding her.

Business was not the only purpose of this trip; he also intended to finalize marriage negotiations for his daughter with a well-known family in the capital and Sanae was accompanying him so that she could be presented to the family. Now, it just so happened that Iwase had been receiving persistent letters predicting a crime nearly every day for about two weeks before their departure.

‘Watch carefully over your daughter. A fearsome demon is plotting her kidnap.’

Each time the frightening message was couched in different phrases and handwriting. The letters piled up and it seemed to him that the hour of her kidnap was drawing nearer with every day.

At first, he was not particularly worried, thinking it just a prank, but

as time passed he became more concerned and finally contacted the police. However, not even the might of the constabulary was sufficient to determine the source of these strange missives. Of course, the letters did not bear a sender's name, while the postmark – whether from within Osaka, or Kyoto, or Tokyo – differed each time.

Given the situation, Iwase considered cancelling the appointment with the family into which his daughter was to marry, but thinking that a move away from the house to which the unpleasant letters were directed might be better for her he decided to make the journey.

Nevertheless, determined to take every precaution, Iwase requested protection for his daughter from a private detective who had shown his ability in the past when the jeweller had hired him to investigate a break-in at the store. Akechi Kogorō was less than enthusiastic, but giving in to Iwase's pleas he undertook to prevent the strange 'theft' indicating that he would stay in an adjacent room while they were travelling.

Wearing a black suit over his slender frame, the famous detective was now sitting on a sofa in a different corner of the same lounge. Much as expected, he was with a beautiful lady in a black dress and they were talking about something in low voices.

'May I ask why you are so interested in this case?'

The detective looked steadily at her eyes as he put the question.

'I'm a devotee of detective novels. When I heard about this business from Iwase-san's daughter, it seemed exactly like something that would happen in such a novel and I was completely captivated. Then, getting to know the famous detective Akechi Kogorō on a familiar basis made me feel, well, as though I too had become a character in one of those books,' answered the woman in black.

Doubtless the reader will have divined that this dark-garbed woman was none other than our heroine, the Black Lizard.

Through her mania for jewels, she had become acquainted with Iwase as one of his customers. When they happened to bump into each other at the hotel, the relationship became closer. Using her amazing social skills, she quickly mesmerized Sanae and they became so intimate that the girl revealed her innermost secrets.

'But the real world is not like a novel, you know. I think this business is probably just a prank being played by some delinquent.'

The detective seemed very low-key about it all.

'But I think that you carry out your investigations with the utmost earnestness. I'm well aware that you walk the hotel corridors at night

and that you question the hotel clerks about everything.’

‘You must be very interested indeed if you know about that. I can’t hide anything from you, can I?’

He spoke with irony, looking intently at her beautiful face.

‘I don’t think this has anything to do with a prank at all. I just feel it – sixth sense maybe. And I think you should be very careful yourself,’ she countered significantly, returning the detective’s look unwaveringly.

‘Thank you very much. But don’t worry. I am looking after the young lady, so she is safe. Not even the most dastardly of villains can go unnoticed by me.’

‘Yes, I am well aware of your capabilities. Still, I can’t help but feel that it might be different this time ... that you face a terrifying opponent who possesses tremendous magical powers.’

Ah! How audacious she was, praising herself before the most famous detective of the age.

‘It seems that you very much favour this hypothetical criminal. Perhaps we should make a wager?’

Akechi made the strange proposal with a laugh.

‘A wager, you say? What fun! To gamble with Akechi. Well, let me bet this – my most precious necklace.’

‘It seems you are serious. All right, what should I forfeit if I lose and the young lady is kidnapped?’

‘Why don’t you stake your occupation as a detective? In that case, I would wager all of the jewels I possess.’

It was the sort of outlandish, fanciful thing one could imagine a lady of leisure might say. But could the famous detective sense behind the words the lady thief’s burning desire to engage him in combat?

‘Interesting. So, you are suggesting that if I lose, I give up my profession? You throw down all your jewels – next to life itself in importance for a woman – while for a man like me work is no great thing.’ Akechi was holding his own.

‘Well, the bet is on! I shall see if I can’t cause Akechi Kogorō to give up his profession.’

‘All right, I accept the bet. I’m looking forward to seeing your splendid jewels come tumbling down! Ha, ha, ha.’

Thus, the joke had all of a sudden become something serious. Just as the incredible exchange ended, Sanae approached all unwitting and spoke genially.

‘Now what are the two of you talking about so secretly? Can I join

in?’

She spoke in an improvised blithe tone, but her face could not hide a slight trace of uneasiness.

‘Oh, it’s you my dear. Come, sit down here. Why, just this minute Akechi-san was complaining that he was bored because this business was just some sort of a prank.’

Mme Midorikawa spoke to Sanae with a kindness that belied her heart.

Then Iwase came over and the group of four began to make small talk, tacitly avoiding any reference to the case. Through a natural momentum, two separate conversations developed – one between the two men and another between the two women.

One Person, Two Roles

After a while, the pair of women stood up and leaving the men deep in conversation began to walk slowly shoulder-to-shoulder between the lounge seats as though taking a stroll. Apart from the sharp contrast between the pitch-black silk dress and the orange shawl, from behind the two looked almost the same in respect of hairstyle and age. They say that beauty is ageless and indeed Mme Midorikawa, though past thirty, looked youthful and innocent as a maid. Without either woman making any specific suggestion, the pair at length glided out of the lounge and walked along the corridor toward the stairs.

‘My dear, would you come to my room for a little while? I would like to show you the doll that we spoke about yesterday.’

‘Oh you have it here with you? I should like to see it.’

‘Oh, I keep it with me always. Why, it’s my sweet slave.’

Aha! And who could this be, this ‘doll’ of whom Mme Midorikawa spoke? Sanae had not the slightest idea, but perhaps a more apt adjective for the ‘sweet’ slave would have been ‘weird’. The reader will have guessed straight away that the slave was actually Jun-chan/Yamakawa Kensaku.

Mme Midorikawa’s room was on the ground floor, while Sanae and her father were staying on the second floor. The pair hesitated for a moment at the base of the stairs, but finally they moved on down the corridor to the older woman’s room.

‘After you,’ said Mme Midorikawa opening the door to her room and inviting Sanae to enter.

‘Oh, isn’t this the wrong room? I thought yours was number twenty-three?’

And indeed it was. The number above this door was twenty-four. This was actually Yamakawa Kensaku’s room, which was adjacent to Mme Midorikawa’s room.

Having finished dinner early and returned half-fleeing to his room, the man-slaying pugilist would now be awaiting the arrival of the fateful moment with bated breath. Also awaiting the victim would be a strip of gauze soaked in knock-out drops and a trunk exactly like a coffin.

Sanae had every reason to hesitate. Somehow she seemed to sense something was afoot. Her sensitive subconscious had perceived the hellish scene that was to unfold momentarily.

But Mme Midorikawa kept her poker face.

‘No, this is it. This is my room. Please hurry on in, now!’

And saying this she put her arm around Sanae’s shoulders and passed together with her through the door.

When they had disappeared, the door slammed shut behind them. Strangely, immediately after the door closed, a key was heard to turn in the lock. The door had been locked from inside.

At the same time, there came from inside a faint sound like a smothered cry of pain.

For a short space of time the interior of the room fell silent again as if completely empty. Then came sounds – a tapping, whispering voices, footfalls moving around quickly, and something bumping into an object. This continued for about five minutes, and then subsided. Then a key could be heard turning in the lock again, after which the door opened slightly and a white face with spectacles peeped out into the corridor.

After establishing that there was no one around, the full figure emerged – and strangely enough it was not Mme Midorikawa, but Sanae. The same Sanae one would have supposed had just now been stuffed inside the trunk.

But, no, it was not. The hairstyle, the spectacles, the kimono, and shawl were just like Sanae, but there was something different. Her breast was just a little too prominent. She was a shade too tall. And more than that, the face ... Though the make-up was truly masterful – and made all the more plausible by the hairstyle and spectacles – a person’s face does not change no matter how much it is made up. This was only Mme Midorikawa disguised as Sanae. Nevertheless, to have effected such a transformation in just five minutes was indeed a feat worthy of this self-styled magician.

What, then, had happened to poor Sanae? There can be no room for doubt. The lady thief’s kidnap plan was progressing smoothly. Sanae had been forced into the trunk. Given that Mme Midorikawa now wore

all her clothes, it seemed certain that Sanae had been stripped naked – as in Mme Midorikawa's 'simulation' that morning – then bound and gagged and cruelly squeezed into the trunk.

'Right, I'm counting on you!' whispered Mme Midorikawa, now transformed into 'Sanae', while closing the door.

From within came a deep male voice in answer, 'Yeah, it'll be all right.'

It was Jun-chan/Yamakawa Kensaku.

She had a bulky cloth bundle under her arm. Carrying this and trying to avoid being spotted, she climbed the stairs. When she came to Iwase's room and peeped quietly in, she found that as expected the jeweller had not yet returned. He was still deep in conversation with Akechi Kogorō in the large lounge downstairs.

The suite comprised three rooms, one leading on to the other: a living room – with a sofa, armchairs, and writing table – a bedroom, and a bathroom. Entering the living room, she opened the drawer of the writing table and took out a small box containing Iwase's Calmotin sedatives. She removed the pills, replaced them with some that she had brought with her, and then returned the box to the drawer as it had been.

Next she entered the bedroom, turned off the bright light on the wall, and after switching on a small stand-lamp she pressed the room-service bell.

Soon there was a knock on the door and a bell-boy came into the living room.

'May I be of any service?'

'Yes, my father is in the main lounge downstairs and I wonder if you would let him know it's time for bed.'

Opening the bedroom door a crack so that her face was in shadow and the living room light fell only on the kimono, she mimicked Sanae's voice skilfully. A little while after the bell-hop had left on his errand, there was a loud sound of footsteps and Iwase came in:

'What, you're all alone? I thought you were with Mme Midorikawa,' he said as if scolding her.

The only thing visible in the dark bedroom was the kimono and Mme Midorikawa cleverly copied Sanae's voice as she murmured, 'Yes, I felt a little ill so I parted with her at the stairs and returned alone. I'm going to sleep. Are you going to bed?'

'You shouldn't do that! I've told you over and over that you are not to be by yourself. What if this business happens?!'

Sitting in the armchair, Iwase spoke quietly, evidently believing that the voice from the bedroom belonged to his daughter.

‘You’re right. And that’s why I sent for you,’ came the innocent voice from the bedroom.

Akechi Kogorō had come in following Iwase.

‘Is your daughter going to bed?’

‘Yes, she’s just changing her clothes now. She says she’s feeling a bit off colour.’

‘I see. Well, then, I’d better leave. Good night.’

After the detective had left for the adjacent room, Iwase locked the door. He wrote some letters for a short while, then, as usual, he took out the Calmotin from the drawer, drank some with water from a bottle on the table and went to bed.

‘Sanae? How do you feel?’

As he asked this he moved around her toward the bed in the corner. She pulled the blanket up to her chin, turned her face into the shadow, and with her back to him answered somewhat grumpily, ‘I’m fine! I’m a bit sleepy.’

‘Oh dear, you’re a bit strange tonight. You seem a little angry.’

But he was not particularly suspicious and being careful not to upset his out-of-sorts daughter he sang softly to himself while putting on his nightclothes and slipping into bed.

The powerful sleeping pills – with which Mme Midorikawa had secretly replaced the jeweller’s night-draught – proved effective. As soon as Iwase laid his head on the pillow he was overcome by drowsiness and, without any time for thinking, he soon fell into a deep sleep.

Just over an hour later, around ten o’clock, Akechi Kogorō was reading in his room when he was startled by a loud knocking at what seemed to be the adjacent room. Stepping out in the corridor to investigate, he saw a hotel clerk holding a telegram in his hand anxiously trying to rouse the jeweller.

‘It’s strange that he isn’t replying even though you’ve tried so many times.’

A little anxious, Akechi joined the clerk in knocking loudly at the door, regardless of any disturbance to the other guests.

The repeated knocking seemed to counteract the powerful sleeping draught, for Iwase’s drowsy voice came from within the room.

‘What is it? What’s all this racket?’

‘Could you just open the door a minute. There’s a telegram for you.’

After Akechi had shouted this, a key scraped in the lock and the door opened.

In his nightclothes and looking very sleepy, Iwase rubbed his eyes as he opened the telegram, and looked at it in a daze.

‘Oh hell! More pranks! And you want to wake a man from his sleep for this!’ he said, tutting disapprovingly as he passed the paper to Akechi.

‘TONIGHT – STOP – BE CAREFUL AT TWELVE – STOP’

A simple note, but the meaning was clear. This was one of the threatening messages and its meaning was ‘Sanae’s kidnapping will take place tonight at midnight.’

‘Is your daughter all right?’

The tone of the private eye’s question showed he was somewhat concerned.

Approaching the door of the bedroom a little unsteadily, Iwase looked at the bed in the corner and said in a reassured voice, ‘She’s fine. Don’t worry. She’s sleeping right next to me.’

Akechi also went behind and peeped in to see Sanae sleeping peacefully with her back turned to them.

‘Recently Sanae has been taking Calmotin every night just like me so she sleeps soundly. And tonight the poor thing said that she wasn’t feeling particularly well so please don’t wake her up.’

‘Is the window closed?’

‘Yes, don’t worry. It’s been latched shut all day.’

Iwase then climbed into bed.

‘Akechi-san, would you mind locking the door and looking after the key.’

The jeweller was so sleepy that even locking the door seemed a bother.

‘Actually, instead of that, I’ll stay in the suite for a while. Please leave the bedroom door open. If we do that, I’ll soon realize if anyone breaks the window and tries to get in while you’re asleep because I can see the window from here. We only need to watch the window – there’s no other way in or out.’

Once Akechi had taken on a case, he discharged his duty faithfully. He sat down in a seat in the lounge, lit up a cigarette, and steadily monitored the bedroom.

Some thirty minutes passed without anything happening at all. Occasionally the private eye got up to go and peep into the bedroom, but Sanae remained asleep in the same position. Iwase was snoring

loudly.

‘What! Are you still up? I came because the hotel clerk told me just now that a strange telegram had arrived and I was a little worried.’

Surprised by the voice, Akechi turned to see Mme Midorikawa standing just outside the half-opened door.

‘Is that you, Mme Midorikawa? There was a telegram, but I’m here, so everything will be all right. I’ll stand guard, even though it’s pointless.’

‘So, did a threatening telegram arrive at the hotel, then?’

As she said this, the lady in black opened the door and came into the room.

Now perhaps readers will think that the author has committed a major bungle here. They might object that because Mme Midorikawa had disguised herself as Sanae and was sleeping in the bed beside Iwase, it would make absolutely no sense for the same Mme Midorikawa to be coming into the room from the corridor.

But the author has not made a mistake. Both are correct. And this is the only Mme Midorikawa in existence. What this all means will become clear as our story unfolds.

Twilight Knight

‘Is Sanae sleeping quietly?’ asked Mme Midorikawa as she closed the door and sat down in front of Akechi. Her voice was low and she was looking toward the bedroom.

‘Um,’ responded Akechi absent-mindedly, obviously deep in thought.

‘With her father?’

‘Hmm ... yes.’

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Iwase Shōbei was still in a drugged sleep in the bed adjoining Sanae’s bed, after having asked Akechi to guard them.

‘Not very informative answers, are they?’ smiled Mme Midorikawa. ‘So what are you so deep in thought about? Surely you’re not worried now that you’re on guard here?’

‘Oh, you’re still talking about that silly wager,’ said Akechi, finally lifting his head to look at her as he took up the challenge of the beautiful woman. ‘You’re hoping I’ll lose, and that poor girl will be kidnapped, right?’

‘Oh, how could you say such a thing? That I would wish such a terrible tragedy on Mr Iwase! I’m just worried about her. So tell me, what did the telegram say?’

‘Just to be careful at midnight,’ he explained, as if he found it humorous.

He glanced at the clock on the mantle. It read 10:50.

‘There’s still a little over an hour. And I’m sure you’ll sit here the whole time. Won’t you be bored?’

‘No, not at all. I’m enjoying myself. If I weren’t a detective, how many times in my life would I be able to enjoy such dramatic moments? But you must be tired, Mme Midorikawa. Please, take your rest.’

‘My, selfish, aren’t we? I’m enjoying myself perhaps even more than

you! Women just love wagers. May I stay here with you, although I'm sure I'm a bother to you?'

'Still talking about that wager? As you wish.'

The unlikely couple sat silently for a while facing each other, and then Mme Midorikawa noticed a pack of playing cards on the desk. She proposed a game to fight off sleepiness, and when Akechi agreed they began a strange game of cards while waiting for the midnight caller.

It was a very long hour indeed, precisely because it was so threatening, but thanks to the cards it seemed to pass fairly quickly. Of course, throughout their gaming Akechi never failed to look into the bedroom through the open door, noting that the window remained perfectly normal – and if the kidnapper was to enter the bedroom, the window was the only route left open.

'Let's stop, shall we? It's five to twelve now,' suggested Mme Midorikawa, with an irritated expression showing she could play cards no longer.

'Still five minutes. We have time for another hand. And if we keep playing, I've no doubt that midnight will pass with nothing untoward happening,' drawled Akechi, inviting her as he shuffled.

'Oh, stop that! You mustn't slight the kidnapper. As I said before, I don't think this person will break that promise. I'm sure ... even now ...'

Her face was tense, taut.

'Mme Midorikawa, you mustn't get so nervous,' laughed Akechi. 'Where in the world is this mysterious kidnapper going to enter from?'

At his words, she lifted her hand, and pointed at the room entrance.

'Ah, the front door. Well then, to set you at ease, why don't I just lock it?'

He rose, and walked over to lock it securely with the key he had received from Iwase.

'There. Unless they break down the door, no one will be able to approach Sanae's bedroom. As you know, there is no way in except through this room.'

Mme Midorikawa, like a child terrified by a ghost story, raised her hand again to point at the window, shadowed in the gloomy bedroom.

'Ah, the window. So you suggest the kidnapper could enter the courtyard and use a ladder? But the window is securely locked from the inside. And even assuming the criminal should break the glass and enter, I can see the window quite well from here – and in that event

you would be able to witness my ability at shooting a pistol.'

As he spoke, he tapped his right-hand pocket meaningfully. A small pistol was hidden there.

'Sanae is sleeping so peacefully, unaware of what's happening,' said Mme Midorikawa, peering quietly into the bedroom. 'But why doesn't Mr Iwase wake up? He's far too unconcerned for my taste!'

'He mentioned that they both take sleeping draughts every night before retiring. They must be worn out by the fear of that terrible note.'

'My goodness! There's only one minute left! Akechi-san, are you sure everything's all right?'

She stood, voice quavering.

'Yes, everything's just fine. Absolutely nothing will happen.'

Akechi had also stood, quite unconsciously, and was peering bemusedly at Mme Midorikawa's face, which was so unusually agitated.

'But there are still thirty seconds,' she argued, returning his gaze with fire in her eyes. The woman thief was drunk with the thrill of victory. At last, the time had come to surpass Akechi Kogorō, the famous detective, and scream in triumph.

'Mme Midorikawa, are you so certain of the kidnapper's skill?'

His eyes, as well, were smouldering: he was trying valiantly to decipher the bizarre expression on her face. What was it? What in the world was this beautiful woman thinking, to be so excited?

'Yes, I am. Although it could just be my imagination running off with me. But when I think that even now the twilight knight could be sneaking closer, ready to snatch this beautiful child from our midst, I can see it happening right in front of my eyes!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' Akechi finally burst into laughter. 'Please, Mme Midorikawa, take a look! While you've been enjoying your medieval storytelling, the clock has already passed midnight! Looks like I've won the wager after all. Shall I claim your jewels now? Ha, ha, ha!'

'Akechi-san, do you truly believe that you have won the wager?'

Her red lips were twisted now, speaking oh-so-slowly. As she savoured the ecstasy of victory, she had even forgotten her assumed role as a lady of class.

'What ...? You mean, you are ...?'

Akechi discerned the meaning of her comment instantly, and his face drained of colour as a terrifying and unknown fear swept through him.

'You haven't yet checked to be sure that Sanae is still safe or not,'

she prodded, crowing in victory.

‘But, but ... Sanae-san is still ...’

The famous detective was foundering fast. His broad forehead was suddenly shiny with greasy sweat.

‘You will tell me she is quietly asleep in bed, I’m sure. But I wonder if that is really Sanae-san, sleeping there ... I wonder if it couldn’t be a totally different girl?’

‘That’s ... impossible!’ he asserted powerfully, but it was clear he recognized the threat in her words as he ran into the bedroom and roused Iwase.

‘Wha ...? What is it? What’s happened?’ asked Iwase, sitting bolt upright as he finally defeated the last traces of sleepiness and woke up fully.

‘Please, look at your daughter. Is that truly your daughter sleeping there?’

A most absurd question, one hardly worthy of the famous Akechi.

‘What in the world are you talking about? Of course it is. If it isn’t my daughter, who could it possibly ...’

He broke off suddenly. As if suddenly noticing something, he stared at the back of Sanae’s head as she lay sleeping with her face turned away from him.

‘Sanae! Sanae!’

Although breaking into coughs, Iwase continued to call her name. There was no answer. He left his bed, and approached hers, wavering unsteadily, then placed a hand on her shoulder to awaken her.

‘Akechi-san! She’s gone!’ the old man shouted, furiously.

‘Who is it? The person sleeping there, it’s not Sanae?’

‘Look! This isn’t a person at all! We’ve been duped like fools!’

Akechi and Mme Midorikawa ran to her bed ... it wasn’t a person. What they had been so sure was Sanae was actually just the head of a doll. The head of a storefront mannequin had been decorated with a pair of eyeglasses and a Western-style wig to look just like her. The quilt had been bunched up to simulate her body, and a blanket thrown on top.

The Detective Laughs

The head of a doll. What a trite device; what an outstanding scam. A trick played by children. But, exactly because it was the sort of trick you would expect from a child, the adults fell for it completely. Even Akechi Kogorō had never thought the kidnapper might do this sort of thing.

Even so, who in the world was the ‘twilight knight’ that Mme Midorikawa had mentioned? Who in the world could have kidnapped Sanae and left that silly doll’s head in her place? The reader already knows: the twilight knight was, of course, none other than Mme Midorikawa herself. As mentioned in the previous chapter, she disguised herself as Sanae and climbed into bed, fooling her father. After he had drugged himself asleep, she set up the doll’s head and returned to her own room. Readers will recall that when she visited Iwase’s room she was carrying a bulky bag with her. That was the core of the trick, the doll’s head.

In all his years learning to be a detective, Akechi Kogorō had never felt so miserable. There was nothing he could say in response to Iwase’s betrayed trust, or to Mme Midorikawa, either. And for the root of the failure to be this doll’s head, this child’s prank, was so embarrassing as to be unbearable!

‘Akechi-san, my daughter, whom I begged you to protect, has been stolen! You have to get her back! Hurry and get started! And if you can’t handle it by yourself, call the police ... yes, I’ll have to rely on the police now! Call the police! Or shall I?’

Iwase Shōbei was furious, so furious that he had forgotten to be a gentleman, spitting out words to savage Akechi.

‘Please, wait. If you start a ruckus now, we won’t be able to capture the criminal. The kidnapping has happened within the last two hours.’

Through incredible effort, Akechi had recaptured his composure, and

was thinking keenly again.

‘I can say with confidence that nothing happened while I was on guard here. The only conclusion is that the crime was carried out before that telegram was delivered. The intent of that telegram, in other words, was not to warn us that the girl would be kidnapped, but rather to make it look as if the crime was to be committed at midnight, and keep all our attention focused on this room until then. The criminals planned to make good use of that time to flee to a place of safety.’

Mme Midorikawa chuckled.

‘Oh, excuse me. I laughed when I shouldn’t have. But when I think of the famous detective Akechi Kogorō spending two hours faithfully guarding a doll’s head ...’

Ignoring where she was entirely, Mme Midorikawa was belittling Akechi. She had won a complete victory, and could not restrain the fierce joy bubbling up.

Akechi ground his teeth together and withstood her derisive laughter. He had lost, he admitted it. But he could not accept that his defeat was total. Deep in his heart, he felt that there was still a chance, a hope. And until he found out for sure, he could not accept defeat.

‘Even so, my daughter will not come back to us if we just stand here and wait,’ interjected Iwase, growing more irritated by the unsympathetic words of Mme Midorikawa, and turning to attack Akechi. ‘Akechi-san, I’m calling the police. Surely you have no objections?’

Without waiting for a reply he staggered off toward the living room, and reached for the telephone. And at exactly that instant, as if it had been carefully planned in advance, the bell began to ring.

Although Iwase tutted in irritation, he was left with no choice but to lift the receiver. He began ranting and shouting at the poor operator, but then called in anger for Akechi instead.

‘Akechi-san! It’s for you!’

Hearing this, Akechi snapped alert and leaped for the phone as if he had suddenly remembered something.

He conversed with the other party attentively, and then closed the conversation mysteriously, saying ‘Twenty minutes? It doesn’t take that long! Fifteen? No, that’s too long, too. Ten minutes. Come running in ten minutes. I can only last for ten minutes. Got it?’

‘If you’ve done, would you kindly have the operator telephone the police?’ asked Iwase sarcastically, confronting Akechi.

‘Don’t be in such a hurry to phone the police. Let me think for a moment. I’ve made a terrible error.’

Not wasting another word on Iwase, Akechi stood there, deep in thought and seemingly unaware of the room around him.

‘Akechi-san, perhaps you could be bothered to think of my daughter? You accepted the work with confidence, and now ...’

It was only reasonable that Iwase’s anger would be further inflamed by Akechi’s unfathomable attitude.

Another laugh was heard.

‘Iwase-san, poor Akechi-san doesn’t have the leeway to think of your poor daughter right now,’ came Mme Midorikawa’s boastful voice. She had moved from the bedroom back to the living room.

‘Wha–? What?’

Iwase was astonished.

‘Shall I guess what Akechi-san is thinking of right now? He’s thinking of our wager – aren’t you, Akechi-san?’

The lady thief’s enmity for the detective was unmistakable; her attitude bold and indomitable.

‘Iwase-san, Akechi-san made a little wager with me. He wagered his profession as an amateur detective. And since his defeat is now unmistakable, he’s just lost in thought, head drooping. Isn’t that right, Akechi-san?’

‘No, it’s not, madam. I was hanging my head because I was thinking how I pitied your position,’ he replied, returning her volley full-force. What in the world was he thinking, ignoring the kidnapped girl like this? Iwase was totally lost by developments, and stood looking at their faces.

‘Me? You pitied *my* position? Why, I wonder?’ she asked, pressing. Even the master thief was unable to fathom the smile lurking, hidden, behind Akechi’s eyes.

‘Well, madam,’ drawled Akechi, obviously enjoying his own words as he spoke, ‘that’s because the loser of our wager is not me, but you!’

‘Whatever are you talking about. Are you so unable to admit defeat?’

‘Is that what it is?’ he rebutted, obviously enjoying himself.

‘Yes, clearly. How can you say otherwise, with the kidnapper at large?’

‘Ah, so you think I’ve allowed the kidnapper to escape, do you? Not by a long shot! I’ve got the perpetrator right under my thumb!’

When she heard that, even the lady thief couldn’t restrain her reaction. This man had been in the pits of despair a moment ago; what

had he suddenly started saying?

‘Ha, ha, ha! You’re a delightful man! So good at making jokes!’

‘So you think it a joke?’

‘Well, naturally! What else could it be?’

‘In that case, let me show you some evidence, shall I? Let me see ... Suppose I can tell you where your acquaintance Mr Yamakawa Kensaku went after leaving this hotel? What would you think then?’

Mme Midorikawa blanched, and staggered.

‘Why did Mr Yamakawa purchase a ticket to Nagoya, and then get off before the train arrived there? And why did he take a room at the Meiji Hotel here in Tokyo? And what was in his oh-so-large trunk? Suppose I know the answers to those questions? What would you say then?’

‘Lies! It’s all lies!’

She no longer seemed to have the energy to speak properly, merely muttering denials.

‘Lies, are they? Ah, so you haven’t noticed where that phone call was from, then. Shall I explain? It was from an assistant of mine. I was merely waiting for his phone call, while I endured your insults. If Sanae was carried out of this hotel, one of my five assistants surrounding the hotel would be sure to see. You see, I told them that if anyone suspicious, no matter who, came from the hotel, they were to follow him.

‘Ah, I waited so long for that call. And now it seems that I have won, doesn’t it? You made a mistake when you assumed that I was here all alone. You decided that I had no assistants helping me. And now shall I take all of your jewellery, Mme Midorikawa? Ha, ha, ha!’

He laughed, long and loud. Their positions were reversed now, the victor and the vanquished. And the delight of victory tickled Akechi’s heart as much as it had pleased Mme Midorikawa until now, or even more. Even if he had tried to stop laughing, he would have been unable to control it. Yet Mme Midorikawa had the force of will Akechi had shown moments ago to endure the derisive laughter.

‘So you have already recovered Sanae, then? Congratulations. And what have you done with Yamakawa-san?’ she asked in a frigid tone, struggling to hold her voice steady.

‘Unfortunately, he seems to have slipped away,’ admitted Akechi honestly.

‘You let the criminal escape! Oh, my ...’

She was unable to hide her relief.

Iwase spoke up, good humour regained at the unexpected positive news. 'Thank you, Akechi-san, thank you. I must apologize for becoming so excited without knowing that! Please forgive me. I had thought I heard you to say that you had captured the criminal, but now it seems you have let him escape after all.'

'No, not at all. Yamakawa is not the mastermind behind this little plot. I was not lying when I said that I have captured the criminal.'

His words were enough to bring a purple flush to Mme Midorikawa's face. Like a cornered animal, her face grew fearsome, and her eyes searched round and round the room.

But even were she to try to escape, the door was locked!

'Then where is he?' asked Iwase, unaware of what was happening.

'Here. Right in front of us,' said Akechi with satisfaction.

'Right in front of us? But there's nobody here but you, and me, and Mme Midorikawa ...'

'Mme Midorikawa is a terrible thief. She is the one who kidnapped Sanae!'

The deathly silence held for several seconds. The three of them stared at each other, each with a different expression.

It was Mme Midorikawa who finally broke the silence.

'Surely you're kidding. I would hardly have any idea of what Yamakawa-san might be doing. I merely introduced the hotel to him because we had an acquaintance in common! It's too much, really! To accuse me! ...'

But that was the enchantress's last piece of acting.

Even as she finished speaking, a loud knock was heard at the door.

As if he had been awaiting this, Akechi quickly approached the door, and unlocked it with the key he held.

'Mme Midorikawa, no matter how much you try to deny it, here is living evidence. And will you repeat that dreadful lie in front of Sanae-san?'

Akechi drove home the blade with his words.

There in the doorway appeared one of Akechi's young assistants; the pale Sanae, leaning heavily on his shoulder; and a uniformed policeman guarding them.

The Black Lizard was in mortal danger! On this side, there was only a woman, and opposing her were four men (excluding Sanae) ... she couldn't possibly escape!

But what stubbornness! She yet looked as if she refused to admit defeat!

More than that, astonishing as it was, her pale cheeks were suddenly shot through with colour, and she gave a hideous smile that rapidly grew and grew.

Here, brought to bay at last, the audacious woman thief burst into bizarre and incomprehensible laughter!

‘Hah! So this is the climax of tonight’s entertainment, is it? Well, you certainly showed yourself to be worthy of your name as a famous detective, didn’t you! It seems I have lost tonight. Let us call it a defeat. And what of it? Do you honestly think you can take me prisoner? I think you’re expecting a little too much, Mr Detective. Don’t you remember? Are you sure you haven’t forgotten something? Are you sure you haven’t lost something while you were so busy? Ha, ha, ha!’

What could she be thinking of to speak such words in her situation?
What could Akechi have forgotten?

The Master Detective's Defeat

An ordinary person cannot imagine the delight a detective feels at capturing a formidable criminal. That Akechi had become a little careless due to his extreme delight, then, was perhaps understandable. Though pushed toward defeat, the Black Lizard wracked her sharp brain to come up with a way out of the tight corner in which she now found herself. Then, in an instant, she hit on a daring idea.

The drawn expression on her face softened and she was able to laugh back at the detective.

‘So, what do you think you are going to do? You don’t suppose you can capture me, do you? That would be just a little too easy now, wouldn’t it?’

What audacity! For here she was, a mere woman on her own going up against four dour males (excluding Sanae who to all intents and purposes was incapacitated), one of whom was a stern-looking policeman in uniform.

The only escape route was the door to the corridor. But standing in front of the door barring the way were the policeman and the detective’s assistant, who had just now come back. There was the window, but the room was high above the ground and the inner garden below was surrounded on all sides by buildings. So how in the world did she plan to get out of this tight spot?

Ignoring the Black Lizard’s challenge, Akechi spoke to the policeman at the door.

‘Don’t try to bluff your way out! Officer, I am putting this woman in your charge. Please arrest her without delay. She is the mastermind of the kidnapping plot.’

Not knowing the details of the situation, the officer seemed taken aback when told that this beautiful lady was a criminal, but because Akechi was held in high regard by the police investigation unit and the

policeman knew the detective by sight, he did as he was told and moved toward Mme Midorikawa.

‘Akechi-san, please feel your right pocket. Ha, ha. Empty isn’t it?’

Staring balefully at the approaching policeman, the Black Lizard spoke in a high voice.

Surprised, the detective put his hand to the pocket without thinking. It wasn’t there! The Browning that he was sure he had put in his pocket wasn’t there! The lady thief’s magical powers extended to her fingertips. During the confusion in the bedroom shortly before, she had taken the precaution of removing the pistol from Akechi’s pocket.

‘Akechi-san, you really ought to include pocket picking in your research. Your precious pistol is here!’

With a cheery laugh, the lady thief reached to the clothing at her breast and drew out the compact weapon, which she then levelled at them.

‘Now then everybody, please do me the favour of putting your hands up. And if you don’t – well I’ll just let you know that I’m as sharp a shot as Akechi. And I’ll also add that human life doesn’t mean much to me.’

The policeman, who had taken a step toward her, retreated.

Unfortunately only the officer was armed and he would not have enough time to reach the pistol at his hip.

‘Right then, I told you to put ’em up!’

Licking her red lips, the Black Lizard fixed her eyes on the four men, pointing the muzzle of the gun at each in turn. The white finger holding the trigger quivered slightly as if about to apply pressure at any second.

They put up their hands when they saw the expression on her face, which was more manic than murderous. The policeman, the detective’s assistant, Iwase, and even the master detective – found themselves in an embarrassing position for grown men – their arms up in the air as if frozen halfway through a gesture of ‘hurrah!’

Mme Midorikawa rushed to the door with an alacrity befitting her reptilian nickname.

‘Akechi-san, this is your second slip-up. Look ...’

Saying this, she put her empty left hand behind her, took the key from the lock where it had been left by the detective just a little while ago, and waved the shiny object in front of her face.

Not imagining for a moment that this would happen, the detective had in the bustle of the moment unthinkingly left the key in the lock.

Such was the lady thief's acuity that she had quickly thought of a way to use this.

'As for you, my little lady!'

Opening the door and with one foot in the corridor – but not forgetting to keep the pistol aimed – she called to Sanae.

'I really feel very sorry for you, but today just resign yourself to regretting having been born a jeweller's daughter. Another thing – you are too beautiful! Obsessed though I am with jewels, I've come to desire your body even more. And I won't give up. Do you hear that, Akechi-san? I won't give up! I'll be back to claim the little lady again. Well, I'm off!'

The door slammed shut and the key could be heard turning in the lock outside. Sanae and the four men were now locked in the room. And there was only one key. With that taken away, their only way out was to break down the door or to climb down from the window, which was high above the ground.

Still, they had an alternative – the telephone.

Akechi sprang to the handset on the table and rang the switchboard operator.

'Hello? Hello? This is Akechi, the detective! It's very urgent! I want you to make sure the hotel exits are guarded. It's Mme Midorikawa, Mme Midorikawa. She's going to leave the hotel now and she has to be captured. She's a major criminal. Whatever happens, she mustn't escape. Quick now, tell the manager and everyone else. Got it? Oh, wait! Send someone up to Iwase-san's room with a duplicate key. That's also very urgent.'

After putting the phone down, Akechi stamped back and forth in the room before again snatching up the receiver.

'Hello? Hello? Have you done it yet? Did you tell the manager what I said? Oh, good, good. Thanks. Right, now tell them to hurry up with that duplicate key.' Then he turned to Iwase and said, 'The switchboard operator seems to be on the ball. She did everything very quickly. All the exits are being watched. No matter how fast that woman runs, there's still a fair distance from here to the stairs and it would take a while to descend them and then reach an exit so I think it should be all right – perhaps. The famous Mme Midorikawa wouldn't happen to have somebody in her employ that we don't know about, now would she?'

But in making these prompt arrangements Akechi had slipped up again.

For, while the Black Lizard had swiftly descended the stairs, she had gone not toward an exit but to her own room.

Three minutes passed, exactly three minutes.

And lo and behold, when the door to her room opened again, a young gentleman stepped out. Sporting a felt hat, a brightly patterned suit, aristocratic spectacles, and a thick moustache, he carried a snake-wood cane in his right hand and an overcoat on his left arm.

Only the Black Lizard – in keeping with her description of herself as a magician – could perform the astounding feat of putting on a disguise in just three minutes. (She always carried clothes for changing her guise in the bottom of her travel bag.) Avoiding even the slightest oversight, she had also put every last one of the jewels from the trunk into her coat pockets.

When the young ‘gentleman’ came to the corner, he hesitated slightly. Should he exit from the front or the rear?

Meanwhile, the duplicate key had arrived in time and Akechi and his companions had descended the stairs. However, supposing that Mme Midorikawa would not try to escape by the front entrance they had left this for the manager and split up to guard the rear exits. The Black Lizard, though, had apparently got wind of this, for in a show of daring she went out the main entrance holding her head high, and swinging the cane as her shoes clacked loudly on the floor.

The manager and three doormen were guarding the main entrance in a very nervous state. However, considering that there were nearly a hundred guests staying in the hotel, each with visitors from outside, the manager and his assistants could not recognize each guest by sight. Moreover as they were looking for Mme Midorikawa they focused their attention on the female guests. Accordingly, it never occurred to them that the young man who smiled and bowed as he passed out could be Mme Midorikawa and they actually bowed politely as they saw him out and wished him a good evening.

The young gentleman’s shoes clacked on the stone stairs as he descended. Then, whistling as he went, he strolled leisurely out through the hotel gates.

Walking along the shadowy pavement beside the hotel’s boundary fence, the young gentleman came across a man in a suit who for some reason was standing there smoking a cigarette.

Surprisingly, the young gentleman suddenly slapped the man on the shoulder and spoke to him with an air of bonhomie.

‘I expect you’re one of Master Detective Akechi’s men, aren’t you?’

What are you doing loafing around here? There's a great commotion going on in the hotel at the moment because they've just caught a thief. You'd better get a move on and see.'

And indeed it appeared the man was one of Akechi's assistants for though he replied with extreme caution, 'I'm afraid you're mistaken. I've never heard of a "Detective Akechi",' the young gentleman had not taken more than one or two steps before the man, belying his own words and gestures, scurried off toward the hotel.

The Black Lizard turned around to watch him run off. Overcome for a moment by the comicality of it, she forgot herself and let out an eerie laugh.

The Strange Old Man

Although Akechi had been beaten, we can at least say in his defence that he had fulfilled the task he had undertaken – protecting Sanae.

Iwase was simply grateful that his daughter had been saved, considering the fact that the lady thief had escaped to be of secondary importance. He did not praise the private eye's abilities. But then it would seem that the majority of the blame for the way things had turned out rested with the jeweller, for it was he who had slipped up by being taken in by the Black Lizard's disguise and falling asleep in the adjoining bed rather than seeing through the thief's ruse.

However, this was no consolation to Akechi. The frustration he felt at having been defeated by a mere woman was too much for words. And when he learned that thanks to a quick change of disguise his opponent had escaped right under the nose of his lookout, the detective involuntarily shouted angrily at his assistant 'Fool!'

'Iwase-san, she beat me. I can't understand why such a formidable opponent wasn't on my blacklist. I shouldn't have underestimated her. But I won't make the same mistake again. Iwase-san, I swear on my honour that if she should make another attempt on your daughter I will not be beaten again. While I am alive your daughter is safe. This much I promise.'

The passion in the pale-faced detective's pledge was almost frightening. Having set himself against this unusual and powerful foe, his fighting spirit welled up.

Dear readers, please record the private eye's words somewhere in your memory. Will he be able to keep his promise? Or will he fail yet again? And if he should fail, he would have no other choice but to give up his profession ...

The following day, Iwase and his daughter changed their schedule and returned in haste to their home in Osaka. They were very uneasy

on the way, but rather than stay on in the hotel they preferred to return quickly to their home where they could relax among family.

Akechi Kogorō also advised this course and undertook to guard them en route. As there was no telling where the criminal might intervene, he was extremely careful when they went by taxi from the hotel to the station, when they were on the train, and in the taxi that met them when they arrived at Osaka.

In the end, Sanae's party returned home without incident. Akechi then became a guest of the Iwase family, never straying far from Sanae's vicinity. Some days passed with nothing untoward taking place.

Now dear readers, it is time for the author to change the scene and relate the strange experience of a lady who has not yet appeared in our tale. Perhaps this will seem something completely unrelated to the Black Lizard, Sanae, and Akechi Kogorō. However, without a doubt astute readers will easily discern the close relationship between our case and the woman's strange experience.

It took place one evening shortly after Sanae had returned to Osaka. A young lady was strolling along a street in the bustling district of Shinchi with no particular purpose, looking at the show windows on either hand.

Her coat was fringed with fur at the collar and the cuffs, and it became her well, while her high-heeled legs moved lightly. However, her beautiful face conveyed a somewhat dispirited air. She had about her a rather desperate look as if to say 'I'm beyond caring,' and for that reason, she could perhaps have been mistaken for a streetwalker.

Indeed someone had been surreptitiously following her for some time as if she was that type of woman. This vaguely disturbing personage was an old gentleman who wore a brown felt hat and a thick brown coat and carried a stout rattan cane. A large pair of horn-rimmed spectacles sat on his shiny ruddy face and his moustache and hair were completely white.

Although it seemed the young woman knew she was being followed, she made no effort to flee. In fact, using the show window as a mirror, she even looked at the old man with what seemed to be some sort of interest.

Now, in a slightly crooked dark alley just off the well-lit avenue running through Shinchi, there is a café that is famous for its delicious coffee. As if on impulse, the woman glanced back at the gentleman who was tailing her and entered this café. After taking a seat in a

booth in the corner hidden from view by a potted palm, what should the brazen miss do but order two cups of coffee! Naturally, one of these was for the old gentleman she presumed would come in after her.

As expected, he entered the café. After peering about in the dark interior, he spied the young woman and with even greater audacity than she had shown he approached her booth.

‘Excuse me, all alone are we?’

So saying, he sat down opposite her.

‘I felt sure you would come so I ordered a coffee for you.’

She outdid him for cheek.

Even the old gentleman seemed to be somewhat taken aback by this, but soon regained his aplomb and looking the beautiful young woman straight in the face asked her a peculiar question.

‘So, what does it feel like to be out of work?’

Now it was the woman’s turn to look shocked. Blushing, she stuttered out, ‘You know about that? Who are you?’

‘I’m an old buffer you know nothing about. But I know a little about you. Shall I show you? Your name is Sakurayama Yōko and you were a typist for Kansai Trading. However, you had an argument with your boss and he fired you today. Well, what do you think? Am I on the mark?’

‘Yes, you are. You’re just like a private eye.’

The desperate look had quickly come back to Yōko’s face and she shrugged off what he had said as though it was not in the least surprising.

‘Wait, I haven’t finished yet. You left the company around three o’clock, but you still haven’t gone home. Neither have you visited any friends. You’ve just been wandering aimlessly around the city. What on earth do you intend to do?’

The old man seemed to know everything. He must have been tailing Yōko constantly since three in the afternoon until the early evening. But why would he undertake such a tiring and foolish task?

‘What do you expect me to do? What if I decide to change my profession and become a streetwalker from tonight?’

A weak couldn’t-care-less smile appeared on her face.

‘Ha, ha. So I look like that sort of a delinquent old man, do I? No, you’re mistaken. And what’s more, you’re not the type that could do such a thing. Do you think I don’t know that you went into a pharmacy about two hours ago to make a purchase?’

He looked at her eyes intently, confident of his impact.

‘Do you mean these? They’re sleeping pills.’

Yōko produced two boxes of Adalin tablets from her handbag.

‘I doubt a young person like you would be suffering from insomnia. No, I’m sure it wouldn’t be that. And why would you need two boxes of Adalin ...?’

‘Are you suggesting that I intend to kill myself?’

‘That’s right. You see my dear, I’m not completely unacquainted with the feelings of a young lady. Ah, the heart of youth is beyond the fathoming of adult imagination. Death appears so beautiful, no? The pure-hearted virgin wishes to die with her body unsullied. But alongside this there’s a masochism that seeks to throw self and body into the slimy swamp. And only a hair’s breadth between them. Hah! It’s a trick of youth that makes you babble the words “street walker” and buy your Adalin.’

‘All right then, does this mean you are going to favour me with some advice?’

Yōko spoke coldly and looked at him icily.

‘Oh goodness, no! I wouldn’t do anything so uncouth as to offer advice. I’m going to save you from your predicament.’

‘I thought it would be something like that. Thank you, lovely to be “saved” by you I’m sure.’

Her cynical reply suggested that she still misunderstood his intentions.

‘Don’t be so tasteless. I’m seriously trying to help you. I’m not trying to turn you into a kept woman – there’s no strange meaning intended at all. But will you agree to be my employee?’

‘I’m sorry. Do you really mean it?’

Yōko was finally beginning to perceive the old man’s real intentions.

‘Yes, really. Now, forgive me for asking but what was your salary at Kansai Trading?’

‘Just 45,000 yen ...’

‘All right then, let’s agree that I pay you a salary of 90,000 yen a month. In addition, I’ll bear your costs for lodging, food, and clothes. As for the job, all you need to do is enjoy yourself.’

‘Ha, ha, ha. Now wouldn’t that be fantastic!’

‘Listen, this isn’t a joke. Actually there are some special circumstances here – so much so that the employer thinks these benefits might be insufficient. Anyway, what about your parents?’

‘I don’t have any. If they were still alive I probably wouldn’t have

had to endure this unpleasant experience ...’

‘So now you ...’

‘I live all by myself in a small rented place.’

‘Good, good, that’s perfect. Now, will you come along with me just as you are? I’ll sort things out for you at your lodgings later.’

It was a very strange proposal and under normal circumstances, she would certainly not have felt like accepting. But such was Sakurayama Yōko’s state at this time that she was thinking of selling her virtue or committing suicide. This desperation it was that made her nod in agreement.

Outside the café, the old man hailed a taxi and took the woman to the second floor of a ramshackle tobacconist’s located in an area she had never visited near the outskirts of the city. The small, plain room was floored with six discoloured *tatami* mats and the only objects it contained were a little mirror stand in the corner and a trunk.

Although the old man’s behaviour was becoming increasingly strange, Yōko was not at all uneasy because he had let her in a little on the secret behind her employment contract while they were in the car en route to the room. Actually, she was beginning to feel considerable interest in her unusual role.

‘All right now, I’ll have to ask you to put some things on. This is one of the conditions of the job.’

From the trunk, he took out a full set of attire, including a brightly patterned kimono exactly suitable for a woman of Yōko’s age, an obi-belt, a long undergarment for the kimono, a black coat with a fur collar, and a pair of *zōri* sandals.

Before going downstairs he said, ‘It’s only a small mirror stand, but please dress yourself very nicely.’

Yōko changed clothes as she had been instructed, and she was not entirely displeased to be thus wrapped up in luxurious Japanese apparel.

‘Very nice. That’s good – it really suits you.’

The old gentleman had come back upstairs and was standing behind looking at her.

Peering at the mirror Yōko spoke slightly under her breath,

‘But this hairstyle doesn’t look quite right for a kimono.’

‘I’ve arranged that too. Here you go. You’ll have to put this on.’

The old man pulled out something wrapped in a white cloth from the same trunk. He undid the bundle to reveal a weird lump of hair. It was a high-quality Western-style wig.

Stepping around in front of her, he carefully arranged the hairpiece. The face in the mirror was transformed completely.

‘All right, now this might seem to be going too far, but just put up with it.’

So saying, he produced a pair of rimless spectacles for short-sightedness. Without demur, Yōko took the glasses and put them on.

‘We don’t have much time. We’ve got to be there at ten on the dot, so we have to leave now.’

Chivvied by the old man, Yōko hurriedly bundled up the Western clothes she had taken off, pushed them into the trunk and went downstairs.

Leaving the tobacconist’s, they walked to a major road nearby where an automobile was waiting. It was not the taxi they had used earlier. Though past its prime, the car was chauffeured by an imposing man who appeared to know the old gentleman.

Once they had got in, he started to drive without waiting for any directions. After making several turns on big avenues with streetlamps, they eventually came out into a dark suburb.

Then the driver turned and said, ‘We have arrived. How is the time, sir?’

‘Just right. It’s exactly ten o’clock. Now turn off the lights, would you.’

The driver turned a switch, dousing the head and tail lights as well as the lamp in the passenger cabin. With all lights extinguished, the dark vehicle moved along in the pitch black.

Presently the automobile was moving slowly along beside the concrete wall of a large mansion. It could just be made out by the glimmer from the safety lamps standing at half-block intervals.

‘Right, Yōko-san, get ready. Quickly now.’

The old man spoke as if urging an athlete.

‘Yes. Understood!’

Yōko was all aflutter with the mysterious adventure, but she answered firmly.

Suddenly the car stopped in front of what appeared to be the service entrance to the mansion. At the same time, someone outside jerked open the car door and whispered only ‘Quickly.’

Without saying a word, Yōko dashed out of the car. Then, as she had been previously instructed, she rapidly scuttled in through the small doorway.

At the same time, somebody came bundling out in the other

direction like a rubber ball, bumping into Yōko's shoulder before bouncing into the car seat she had just vacated.

For the space of an instant, Yōko caught a glimpse of the person by the wan light of a distant electric light. She could not suppress an involuntary shudder.

Had she seen a ghost perhaps? Or had everything up to now been a frightful nightmare?

Yōko had seen another Yōko. In the past, she had heard tell of *doppelgängers*. Was she, then, perhaps seeing one now?

There were now two Sakurayama Yōkos. One had gone in through the side-door – and another had come out and entered the car. And the two people were almost identical in hairstyle as well as clothing. Nor was that all. What scared Yōko to her core was that the other woman's face appeared to be exactly identical to her own.

However, like a black wind, the car containing this other woman had now disappeared down the road from whence it came, leaving Yōko and her bottomless fears behind.

'Right, come this way.'

In the pitch black, she suddenly became aware that the face of the shadowy male figure, who had opened the car door a moment before, was now near her ear.

The Spider and the Butterfly

The home of jewel merchant Iwase Shōbei was located in Himematsu, on the Nankai Railway Line south of Osaka. Just recently, the top of the concrete wall surrounding his property had been planted with glass shards.

The local people were suspicious, commenting that Mr Iwase had never acted like that sort of unfriendly person before.

But that was not the only thing strange about the Iwase house recently. First of all, the tenants of the old-style *nagaya* house at the gate had changed. Although the family of a long-standing employee had lived there until recently, they had suddenly been replaced by the family of a certain local police inspector, said to be a master of *kendo* swordsmanship.

Poles had been erected here and there throughout the garden, with bright outdoor lanterns hanging from them, and the windows had all been fitted with sturdy steel bars. And in addition to the usual hired help, two well-muscled young men now roomed in the building as bodyguards. The Iwase house was now a small fortress.

And what was he so frightened of, that he felt he had to take such precautions? He was, of course, expecting another attack by the Black Lizard, that woman thief often called the ‘female Arsène Lupin’. For a terrible danger was drawing close to Iwase’s beloved daughter.

The Black Lizard’s kidnapping plans had been foiled by Akechi Kogorō at the Keiō Hotel in Tokyo, but that hadn’t been enough to make her give up. She had vowed to capture Sanae. No doubt she had already come to Osaka, incognito. It would not be surprising if she was already in Himematsu, close to Iwase’s house.

Akechi was determined never to forget just how tricky she was, what magic she could utilize, as so amply demonstrated at the Keiō Hotel. After that, anyone would have taken these precautions, not just Iwase

Shōbei.

And poor Sanae was trapped all alone in an inside room, surrounded by steel bars, and essentially being watched all day long. One adjacent room was occupied by her favourite maid-in-waiting, while Akechi Kogorō slept in the room in front, Akechi having come from Tokyo for that purpose. On both sides of the front hall were the three houseboys and various other maids and helpers. They were all determined to be the first to run to Sanae's aid, if it should come to that, and were waiting eagerly.

Sanae stayed hidden away in her room, not taking a single step outside the walls. And on those rare occasions when she walked in the garden, Akechi or the servants were right with her.

Even that sorceress, the Black Lizard, would not be able to find a loophole here! Demonstrating, perhaps, that it was impossible, Sanae had returned here over two weeks ago and there had not been a single sign of the lady thief.

'Perhaps I was too scared,' thought Iwase, increasingly often. 'Maybe I shouldn't have taken her threats so seriously. Or maybe she has seen our preparations, and given up, recognizing she doesn't have a chance.'

Even as his worries about the kidnapper faded, however, his worries about Sanae grew.

'I wonder if I've been too strict with Sanae. Maybe I shouldn't have imprisoned her in the living room like I have. She was nervous to begin with, and I've only made it worse. It's like she's become a different person: silent and still, with a pale face. If I speak to her, she answers as if she hates talking to me, looking elsewhere. I wish I could improve her mood somehow.'

And as he was thinking, he suddenly recalled the Western-style furniture in the drawing room, which had been delivered just today.

'Of course! She'll be delighted if she sees that!'

The luxurious set of chairs had been ordered over a month ago, and Sanae herself had chosen the fabric to be used.

Iwase felt much better himself for having thought of it, and promptly went to Sanae's room in the depths of the house.

'Sanae, those chairs you liked so much were delivered today. I've already had them placed in the drawing room. Come and see them! They look much finer than I had expected!'

He opened the *fusuma* sliding panel as he spoke, and though Sanae jumped and looked at him, she quickly turned back and slumped down over the table again.

‘Ah ... but not right now ...’

Her voice revealed she had little interest.

‘What a cold response! Anyway, get up and come see!’ In spite of her unwillingness to go, he led her from the room, calling out to the maid next door, ‘I’m going to take Sanae for a few minutes.’

The adjacent room, where Akechi Kogorō slept, was open and empty. He had left earlier that morning to take care of some business. Naturally, before he left he had carefully checked the house, and warned the servants to keep their eyes on Sanae.

Sanae finally arrived at the drawing room, following in the wake of her father.

‘How do you like them? Maybe even a bit too pretty, eh?’

He sat down on one of the new chairs as he spoke.

It was an elegant seven-piece set, with sofa, armchairs, backless chairs for the ladies, and a small chair with a wooden back arranged elegantly about a round table.

‘Oh, they’re beautiful!’

The silent Sanae at last opened her mouth; obviously, she loved the new chairs. She at once sat down on the sofa to test it.

‘It’s a little too firm,’ she said. It felt somewhat different to most sofas.

‘It’s a little stiff when it’s brand new. It’ll soften up as we break it in.’

The sofa felt so unusual that if Iwase had only sat down next to Sanae, he would have been suspicious. But he sat there in one of the armchairs, and made no move to try any of the other pieces of furniture.

As they sat there, a houseboy suddenly stuck his head around the corner to say there was a telephone call; someone from the office in Osaka, it seemed. Iwase hurried off to the desktop telephone in the other room, but even so he did not forget to call into the houseboys’ room and order them to watch out for Sanae, who was in the drawing room.

When he called, two servants at once stepped into the hall and took up watch. At the end of the hall was the drawing room, and no one could enter that room except by passing the servants.

Of course, the drawing room had a number of windows opening on to the garden, but they were all fitted with those stern steel bars. Every path to Sanae, whether from the hall or the garden, was blocked. And had they not been, Iwase would never have left Sanae alone in that room even for an urgent telephone call.

The telephone call made it necessary for Mr Iwase to travel to Osaka immediately. He changed quickly, and left the house, seen off by his wife and the servants.

‘Watch after Sanae. She’s in the drawing room right now. I asked the servants to keep an eye on her, but please go watch her yourself, too,’ he begged of his wife as the servant tied his shoelaces.

She waited for him to climb into the motorcar, and then went toward the drawing room to see how her daughter was doing when suddenly she heard the sound of the piano.

‘Sanae’s playing the piano! She hasn’t played for quite some time now. I’m so glad she’s feeling better! I’ll just leave her to herself for a bit longer.’

Feeling much happier now about her daughter, she warned the servants not to let down their guard, and returned to the living room.

After her father had left, Sanae sat in each chair in turn, comparing their softness, or stood looking out the window. Finally, she opened the piano and began to tap keys at random. She gradually became interested in what she was playing and began a child’s song, then changing to a selection from an opera.

She remained fascinated by the piano for some time, but at last even that palled, and she stood to return to the living room. As she turned, she was transfixed with horror at the totally unexpected sight that met her eyes.

But how could it happen? All paths to this room were locked, whether from the garden or the hallway! There were no spaces behind the piano or any of the furniture that a person could hide in, and these modern chairs were so low nobody could possibly hide under one. Until just a moment ago there had been no other living thing in this room, even a cat, other than Sanae.

In spite of which, a bizarre figure now stood in front of Sanae. Hair stuck out in all directions, scraggly whiskers covered its face and constantly glittering, terrifying eyes watched, above a suit torn and filthy ... Without even stopping to think of who this demonic man might be or how he had got here, she had no doubt that he was one of the Black Lizard’s minions!

It had started exactly as the Black Lizard had promised. Just as people had begun to let down their guard, the kidnapper slipped through their defences like a magician, sneaking through the door like a ghost.

‘Ah, ah, ah! Mustn’t make a sound, dear. I’ll not hurt you, never fear.

After all, you're a precious daughter to us, too.'

His threatening voice was pitched low.

Even without his warning, though, poor Sanae was so terrified that she could not move a muscle or even think of screaming for help.

Smiling eerily, the kidnapper stepped smartly around behind Sanae, and pulled something like a balled-up handkerchief from his pocket. He suddenly swooped down on her, covering her mouth with the handkerchief.

Sanae felt a disgusting pressure along her shoulders and chest, as if she was being smothered by a giant snake. With the handkerchief pressed against her mouth, it was difficult to breathe. She could not remain still an instant longer! She gathered all the strength she had, and struggled to escape from her tormentor's grasp. Like a beautiful butterfly caught in a spider's web, she fluttered hopelessly.

But her furious hands and feet gradually lost their power, and she finally fell still. The anæsthetic had done its job.

When the butterfly's wings stopped fluttering, the kidnapper laid her down gently on the carpet, rearranging her clothing primly and looking down into her gentle, sleeping face with a malicious smile.

Transformation of a Young Lady

Although the sound of the piano had stopped over thirty minutes earlier, there was still no sign of Sanae leaving the drawing room. Until just a few minutes ago random noises had issued from the room, but now there was only silence, and the room behind the door was quiet as the grave.

'She's been in there pretty long now ... 'bout time she came back, isn't it?'

'It's so quiet ... Too quiet! Something funny's going on here!'

The two houseboys on guard, unable to stand it any longer, began to whisper to each other, and just then the maid-in-waiting came from the back, worried about her charge.

'Is the young miss in the drawing room? And the master is with her, of course?'

She was unaware that Mr Iwase had left suddenly on business.

'No, the master had a call from the company, and has gone to Osaka,' they informed her. She looked unhappy at the news.

'That's why we're on guard here, but quite some time has passed and she still hasn't come out. It's been so quiet we were beginning to get worried.'

'Well, then, I'll just go and have a look myself!' said the maid-in-waiting, walking briskly to the door and pulling it open. She took a glance inside, then abruptly slammed it shut and ran back to where the houseboys were waiting. Her face was white as a sheet.

'This is terrible! Go look for yourselves! A strange person is sleeping on the sofa! And I can't see the young miss at all! Seize him, quickly! Oh, it's so frightening!'

The houseboys did not believe her, of course. They wondered if she might be crazy. However, they had no choice but to go and look for themselves. They swung the door open and rushed into the drawing

room.

Astonishing as it was, the maid-in-waiting had not been lying. As she had said, there was someone lying on the sofa, slumping as if dead. A man who looked like a beggar, with a torn suit and bewhiskered face.

‘Get up! Who are you!’ shouted one of the houseboys, a well-built man with a first *dan* judo belt, as he shook the man’s shoulder.

‘Ugh! He’s drunk as a skunk! And the cheek of him scattering his junk on the sofa!’

The houseboy jumped back, almost comically, holding his nose.

And as evidence of his drunken state, the man’s face was unnaturally pale; and large – and empty – whisky bottles rolled on the floor under the sofa. If he had indeed been drinking in this room he was perhaps a little too drunk for the short time he must have been there, but the houseboys were too shocked at events to notice.

They shook him awake. He opened his eyes to slits, then shakily raised his upper torso as he moistened his disgustingly dirty lips with a red tongue.

‘Ah, very sorry chaps. I’m done for. Can’ drink ’nother drop.’

As if mistaking the stately drawing room for a bar, he babbled incomprehensibly at the houseboys.

‘Idiot! Where do you think you are!? Wake up and tell us how you got in here!’

‘Wha ...? How I got in? Heh, heh, takes a thief to catch a thief, right? I know where the best liquor’s hidden, easy enough ...’

‘Enough of that. Where’s the young lady? I can’t see her anywhere! He must have done something!’ broke in the other houseboy, suddenly noticing her absence.

They searched every corner of the room, and strange as it was, there was no sign of anyone except for the totally unknown drunkard. What in the world could it mean? Had Sanae, in some feat of magical art, been transformed into this disgusting drunkard in a matter of only 30 minutes or so? When they thought about what had happened before they took up watch, and what they saw now, they could think of no other answer ...

‘Hey, when did you enter this room? There should have been a beautiful young girl in here; you didn’t see her? Answer me properly!’

No matter how they shook his shoulder, the man showed no sign of feeling it.

‘Ooo ... a beautiful young girl, huh? That’d be nice, huh? Well, bring her in! ... to see the face of a beautiful girl again, after all this time ...

Lemme see! Hurry up, come on! Bring on the gals! Yee-haw!’

It was inconsequential drivel.

‘We’re just wasting time asking this fool questions. Let’s just call the police and let them take care of him. Leave him here any longer and he’ll cover the whole room with his disgusting filth!’

Mrs Iwase, alerted by the maid-in-waiting, came running in, but when the fastidious woman heard that a drunkard who looked like a beggar was vomiting in the drawing room, she was unable to force herself to enter the room at all. Surrounded by a bevy of maids, she timidly peered into the room from the doorway, but when she heard the houseboy’s comment she immediately agreed.

‘Yes, do so at once! Call the policeman right now! Someone! Call the police!’

And so the vagabond was thrown into the jail at the local police station, but after the two policemen had frog-marched him off, feet dragging, the room was left with a thick miasma of vomit, which emanated from the disgusting pool on the sofa.

‘And that was such a beautiful sofa, just delivered today!’ said the maid-in-waiting, looking in the door with a frown on her face. ‘Oh, dear! It’s more than just dirty. Look! It’s ripped, too! My goodness! He must have been carrying a knife! The upholstery is ruined!’

‘Oh, and it was just finished! What a shame! We can’t leave that here in the drawing room. Somebody call the furniture store and have them come pick it up at once! It’ll have to be reupholstered.’

The fastidious Mrs Iwase demanded that the filthy sofa be removed from her home as soon as possible.

Once the uproar about the drunk died down, people once again noticed that Sanae had vanished. Of course, Mr Iwase was notified at once. Akechi, who had told them where he would be, was also notified by telephone to return at once.

A manhunt was started through every corner of the house ... three policemen and all of the houseboys and other servants began the search in the drawing room, moving to Sanae’s room, then upstairs, downstairs and even under the garden patio.

However, the beautiful girl had vanished like the mist in the morning sunlight. Strange as it was, there was not a single trace of her anywhere in the house.

The Magician's Strange Trick

Having been informed promptly about the commotion with the drunk, Iwase and Akechi arrived back from Osaka a couple of hours later. In Iwase's lounge the pair were talking animatedly about the baffling event. Mrs Iwase and the nanny looked on from the side. The two servants on duty at the time had been summoned and were waiting self-effacingly.

'What a mistake on my part. Really, it seems I let my guard slip.'

Akechi appeared to feel he was very much to blame.

'No, no, it wasn't your mistake. I'm the one to blame. My daughter seemed extremely downcast and I let her go into the drawing room because I felt sorry for her, but that was wrong of me. If anyone let his guard slip, it was me.'

Mrs Iwase spoke in a similar vein to her husband.

Putting an end to something that was now in the past, Akechi said, 'But it doesn't help to say these things now. Rather, we need to find out when your daughter left the drawing room and where she was taken to.'

'You're right. And that's just what I can't understand. You, Kurata, you lot didn't keep your eyes open, did you? Didn't you see my daughter leave the room?'

The servant named Kurata replied to Iwase with a somewhat disgruntled expression, 'No, I am sure she didn't! We guarded the door carefully. And if Miss Sanae left the drawing room to go to another room, she would have to use the corridor where we were standing. There is absolutely no way that we would not see her passing in front of our eyes.'

'Hrrmph! You're very cocky aren't you! So how did my daughter disappear then? Are you saying that she broke through those thick steel bars on the window and jumped out or something? Well, what do

you say? Perhaps the grille wasn't on properly, mmh?"

When Iwase's emotions got the better of him, he tended to become sarcastic.

The servant instantly assumed a respectful demeanour and, while scratching his head, provided straight answers regarding what he actually knew.

'There is no sign that the grille – or for that matter the window glass and the latch – had been tampered with.'

'There you have it then! She must have slipped past you, right?'

'Let's hold on shall we. I don't think they overlooked anything. They would have had to have missed not only your daughter but the drunk coming into the drawing room ... and, no matter how inattentive they might have been, I think it unlikely that they would not have noticed the entrance and exit of two people.'

Akechi was lost in thought.

'Well it might appear unlikely but that is what happened!'

Iwase spoke with increasing vitriol, but Akechi continued unheedingly.

'The steel bars have not been broken. And if the servants let nothing slip there is only one conclusion. No one came into the room or left the room.'

'Hah! So are you saying that Sanae transformed into that drunk? You've got to be kidding. My daughter isn't a hermaphrodite!'

'Mr Iwase, you showed your daughter some newly built chairs, didn't you? Were those chairs delivered today?'

'That's right. They were delivered just after you went out.'

'Somewhat peculiar, don't you think? Doesn't it strike you that there might be a link between the delivery of the chairs and the abduction of your daughter? It does me ...'

The detective narrowed his eyes and seemed to sink into deep thought for a while. Then with a start he lifted his head and uttered something that seemed without meaning.

"‘The Human Chair.’ Could that novelist's fiction become reality?'

Then Akechi stood up and with a very preoccupied look suddenly went out of the room without saying anything to anyone.

Surprised by the famous detective's outlandish behaviour, they all just stood there dumbstruck looking at each other. Then they heard Akechi run back and shout from the corridor.

'Where has the sofa been put? I can't see it in the drawing room!'

'Mr Akechi, calm down please. At the moment we are concerned

about my daughter.'

After Iwase spoke, Akechi finally came back into the room. But standing fixedly in front of them he asked, 'No, I want to know where the sofa is. Where has it gone?'

One of the servants answered, 'Well, I said so before, but ... The man from the furniture shop came to pick it up and I handed it over. He had been told by Mrs Iwase to replace the torn section.'

'Is that right, Mrs Iwase?'

'Yes. That drunk left it in such a state – all ripped up and filthy – I told them to come and pick it up quickly.'

'Ah ... is that so. You've gone and done something unwise. And it's probably too late now ... But, then maybe ... yes, just maybe I was wrong. May I use your phone?'

Muttering softly in a somewhat distracted way, the detective snatched up the receiver from the phone set on the table.

'You there, tell me the phone number of the furniture shop.'

Akechi repeated the number loudly to the operator as he heard it from the servant.

'Hello, is that the Nakano Furniture Shop? This is the Iwase residence. Your people just came to pick up a sofa. Has it arrived at your end yet?'

From the other end of the line came a confusing response, 'Eh? A sofa? Oh, yes, I understand. Er, sorry about taking so long. Actually, I was just about to send one of my men to pick it up.'

Akechi shouted back impatiently, 'What did you say? You are going to send someone to pick it up now? Are you certain? We have already handed it over at this end.'

'I'm afraid that can't be. No one has gone from here yet.'

'Are you the boss? Look I want you to make sure. Is it possible that someone came here without you knowing?'

'No, they couldn't have. I haven't yet told anyone from the shop to visit the mansion, so there's no reason why any of our people would go there.'

Once he had heard this, Akechi slammed down the receiver. Still standing, he looked as though he was about to run off somewhere again, but he seemed to change his mind. Instead, he rang the local police and asked for the officer in charge of investigations. On the first day that he had become a guest of the Iwase household, Akechi had made sure to establish himself on friendly terms with this officer. In the present situation, this stood him in good stead.

‘This is Akechi, the detective, at the Iwase house. It’s about the sofa that was damaged by that drunk. Someone pretending to be from the furniture shop has taken it from the mansion, stuck it on a truck and made off. I don’t know where they went, but could you put out an all-points-bulletin and have the criminal arrested? That’s right. Yes, the sofa ... “The Human Chair,” see? “The Human Chair.” No, I’m not kidding. Huh? I think so. There’s no other possibility is there? Thank you, officer. I am sure that my guess is accurate. I’ll telephone you later to give you the details.’

Just as he was about to end the call, he received some important information from the officer.

‘What’s that? Escaped? He was a vital link! They didn’t pay enough attention because they thought he was drunk? Mmh, well it wouldn’t hurt, but he’s extremely deceptive. I’m sure he’s in league with the Black Lizard. And we actually had him! Can’t you lay hands on him again? Please do all you can. Lives depend on it ... two. Both the sofa and that drunken villain ... All right, speak to you later.’

The receiver clattered down. Akechi remained stooped over with a disappointed expression. Everyone had been listening to the phone conversation very anxiously. With each phrase, they had come to understand why the detective had behaved so outlandishly.

‘Akechi-san, thanks to that phone conversation I more or less understand what happened. And I’m amazed at your insight. Still, I can’t get over the daring, unparalleled trickery of that criminal. So the man who passed himself off as a drunk hid inside a specially prepared sofa that had been switched at some point with the real sofa made by the furniture shop. Then the sofa containing a human being was placed in the drawing room. Next Sanae enters ... the man sneaks out from the sofa and my daughter ... Akechi-san, was my daughter ... did the villain murder ...’

Alarmed, Iwase broke off in mid-sentence.

Seeking to set Iwase’s mind at rest, Akechi replied, ‘No, there’s been no killing. As you will remember from the Keiō Hotel, she wants your daughter alive.’

‘Well, I think so too but ... So next, he put my unconscious daughter in the hollow inside of the sofa where he had previously hidden. Then he lay on top and began to feign that he was in a drunken stupor. Ah, that filthy villain.’

‘Excellent, Mr Iwase. You are as imaginative as the Black Lizard. I believe things happened as you say ... The frightening thing about her

is that alongside such an extraordinary way of thinking she has the audacity to calmly implement such silly tricks. This idea is exactly like something you would read in a fairy story. There is a certain novelist whose works include a story called “The Human Chair”.^{fn1} The story is about a villain who hides inside a chair and gets up to mischief. The Black Lizard has artfully enacted this novelist’s nonsensical imaginings. The soiled man can be found in a story too. The liquid didn’t come from his mouth onto the sofa – it was prepared beforehand and then poured on top of the sofa from a bottle. That’s right, a bottle. I’m sure that if you checked the liquid remaining inside that large whisky bottle, you would find it is vomit. This actually comes from a story in a very old Western fairy tale. In that story, it isn’t vomit but something more disgusting.’

‘So what about the drunk escaping from the lock-up?’

‘Yes, it seems he got away. Both the drunk and the sofa disappeared just like in a fairy tale.’

Without thinking, Akechi let out a bitter laugh, but he resumed his serious expression and added,

‘However, Mr Iwase, I haven’t forgotten the pledge I made in the Keiō Hotel. Please rest assured that I will guard your daughter with my life. I have no intention of doing anything foolish. Please have faith in me ... Look at my face. Do I seem pale? Do I look worried? Not at all! I am calm! See how calm I am.’

Akechi laughed cheerfully. It did not appear to be bravado. He was grinning in all earnestness. They all looked at the master detective’s bright cheerful countenance.

The Star of Egypt

The next day, the story of the abduction of the jeweller's daughter was carried in the national dailies. The local police and the Osaka district constabulary applied all their might to the search for Sanae. Sofas in department store displays, the show windows of furniture stores, and railway station freight storehouses were all the subject of suspicious scrutiny. Some nervous citizens would not sit on their drawing room sofas without first checking the condition of the base.

A full day passed without any news as to the whereabouts of the sofa into which a person had been crammed. Was the beautiful Sanae still alive or had she died? It was as if she had completely vanished from the face of the earth.

Naturally, Mr and Mrs Iwase were very distressed. And given that it was entirely their fault that Sanae had been led into a perilous situation and that the kidnapper had been overlooked, they could not hate anyone. Still, overwhelming sadness and rage caused them to lose perspective and they felt like blaming Akechi for his imprudence in leaving the house.

Of course, Akechi was aware of this feeling. Moreover, in light of his reputation as a master detective, he felt a heavy sense of responsibility regarding the abduction as well as frustration that mistakes could not be undone. Nevertheless, he was not in the least disconcerted, like an ever-victorious army chief who always retains hope in his breast.

'Iwase-san, please believe me when I tell you that your daughter is safe. I promise that I will get her back. Even though she is in the kidnappers' hands, she will definitely come to no harm. They will treat her as carefully as a treasure. There are reasons why they must do so. You should not be concerned in the slightest.'

Rephrasing the same message several ways, Akechi sought to assuage Mr and Mrs Iwase.

‘You say you can get our daughter back Akechi-san, but where is she now? Are you suggesting that you know her whereabouts?’

Iwase’s question was full of sarcasm.

‘Yes, I do. Or as good as.’

Akechi was unmoved.

‘Hah! Then would you be so kind as to go and bring her back? Since yesterday, you seem to have just folded your arms and left everything up to the police. If you know as much as you say, please take the appropriate action quickly.’

‘Well, actually I’m waiting.’

‘What do you mean waiting?’

‘For a message from the Black Lizard.’

‘For a message? That’s silly. Do you mean to say that the criminal will send a message saying “Please come and collect your daughter”?’ Iwase’s question was laced with loathing, and he snorted derisively.

‘That’s right!’

The master detective answered like an innocent child.

‘I think the criminal might send a message asking us to come and collect your daughter.’

‘Hah?! Are you in your right mind? The criminal would never do such a thing ... Akechi-san, I’m offended that you make jokes in this situation.’

The jeweller spoke bitterly.

‘It’s no joke. You’re certain to find out at any moment ... Aha! Perhaps there’ll be a message among these.’

They were sitting facing one another in the drawing room where Sanae had been kidnapped and just then one of the servants brought in a bundle of letters that had arrived in the afternoon post.

‘Among these, you say? A message from the kidnappers?’

Iwase replied absently with a look suggesting this was nonsense. At the same time he took the letters from the servant and checked the sender’s name on each. All of a sudden, he let out a sound of surprise and then asked in a panic,

‘What’s this? What on earth can this be?’

The letter was enclosed in a high-quality Western-style envelope, whose reverse side contained no sender’s name. In the lower left corner, however, there was a skilfully drawn image of a pitch-black lizard.

‘It’s the Black Lizard.’

Akechi was not in the least surprised. His expression seemed to say ‘I

told you so!’

‘The Black Lizard! It’s an Osaka city postmark.’

Iwase’s attentive merchant’s eye had quickly discerned the seal.

‘Akechi-san, how did you know about this beforehand? It is indeed a message from the criminal. Well, I must say ...’

He looked at the master detective in admiration. Cantankerous the old fellow might be, but he also regained his composure quickly.

‘Please open it. There will be some sort of demand from the Black Lizard.’

Following Akechi’s prompting, Iwase opened the envelope carefully and unfolded the letter contained within. Written on the sheet of white paper within, with a clumsiness that somehow looked studied, was the following:

Dear Mr Iwase,

Please excuse yesterday’s commotion. Your daughter is in our safekeeping. She is hidden in a place that the police can never find.

Would you like to buy your daughter back from me? If you would, you must meet the following conditions for the deal.

Payment: The ‘Star of Egypt’ (which is in your holding)

Time: 5:00 p.m. on the seventh (tomorrow)

Place: The observation deck at the top of Tsutenkaku Tower in Tennoji Park

Method: Iwase Shōbei will bring the item at the above time to the top of Tsutenkaku. He will come alone.

If any of the above conditions are not fully met, or this is reported to the police, or there is any capture attempt after the item has been handed over – your daughter will be killed.

The above conditions having been carefully adhered to, your daughter will be delivered to her home in the evening of that day. You must comply with the above. Do not reply to this letter. Unless you come to the designated place at the designated time tomorrow, the transaction will be considered incomplete and I will then immediately proceed to the prescribed action.

The Black Lizard

When Iwase had finished reading the letter, an expression of great perplexity came onto his face and he appeared to fall into deep thought.

‘Is it the Star of Egypt?’

Akechi had realized what was on the jeweller’s mind.

‘Yes, I don’t know what to do. It’s my personal property, but it would be more correct to classify it as a national treasure. And I don’t want to turn it over to a vile thief.’

‘I understand it is extremely valuable.’

‘The market value is a hundred and fifty million yen, but it is too valuable a treasure to exchange for that sum. Do you know the history of the piece?’

‘Yes, I have heard.’

The most precious diamond in Japan, The ‘Star of Egypt’ had originated in South Africa, and as the name suggests, this thirty-carat brilliant cut gem was once kept in the treasure vaults of Egyptian royalty. Later, the stone passed into the hands of various European nobles, before certain circumstances resulted in it being purchased by a jewellery merchant at the time of the Great War. Having changed hands several times thereafter, the diamond had been acquired by the Paris branch of Iwase Co. just a few years ago. Now it was in the keeping of the Osaka head office.

‘This stone’s got a long history, you know. For me, it’s just about as valuable as my own life. I’ve taken every precaution to make sure that it is not stolen. Apart from me, no one else knows where the jewel is kept. That includes all the staff at the store and also my wife.’

‘So, for the thief, it was easier to steal a living person than a single jewel.’

Akechi was intently nodding to himself.

‘Yes. There have been several attempts to steal the Star of Egypt. Each time, I got a little wiser. Finally, I decided to make the hiding place a secret that only I knew. Even the smartest thief can’t steal the secret from inside my head ... But that trouble is all to no avail now. It didn’t occur to me that someone might get their hands on the jewel by demanding it as ransom for my daughter ... Akechi-san, it may be a priceless treasure, but it isn’t as important as a person’s life. I’m afraid I give up. Let’s hand over the jewel.’

Iwase’s pale face bespoke the firmness of his resolution.

‘There’s no need to hand over such a valuable piece. You can just ignore that blackmail letter. Nothing will happen to threaten your daughter’s life.’

Akechi sought to reassure Iwase, but the stubborn man was not convinced.

‘No, there’s no knowing what that fearful fiend might do. No matter how valuable the jewel is, it’s still just a stone. I couldn’t bear it if something should happen to my daughter just because I was reluctant to let go of a stone. I want to go along with the thief’s proposal.’

‘Well, if you have made up your mind, I can’t stop you. Indeed, one stratagem would be to let the enemy think we have fallen into her trap and hand over the jewel. And from my experience as a detective, I think that might even work to our advantage. But please do not worry at all. I make you a firm promise that I will get back both your daughter and the jewel. We will let the thief rejoice, but only for a short while.’

Akechi’s confidence and forceful tone suggested that he might have something up his sleeve.

Black Lizard on the Tower

The following day, just a little before the designated five o'clock in the afternoon, Iwase Shōbei followed the instructions of his enemy to the letter, arriving under the steel tower that scraped the sky, at the entrance to Tennoji Park, without telling anyone other than Akechi Kogorō.

Tennoji Park was the largest amusement district in the Osaka region, its enormous space thronged with pleasure-seekers every day. The interwoven streets were packed with theatres, movie houses, restaurants, and bars of all types, while a veritable symphony was created by street vendors hawking their wares, the sound of record players, crying children, and tens of thousands of shoes and wooden sandals, all shrouded in the dust of their passage. And there in the middle of it all was the Tsutenkaku steel tower, modelled after the Eiffel Tower of Paris, soaring into the clouds and looking down over the streets of Osaka.

How bold! How daring! The Black Lizard had designated the top of a popular sightseeing tower in a bustling amusement zone as the place to pay the ransom. No one but she would have had the audacity to dare such a drama, such an adventure.

Iwase was a merchant, with fairly steady nerves, but when he realized he would soon be face-to-face with the kidnapper his heart would not stop pounding. A little tense, he boarded the elevator to the top of the tower.

As the elevator rose, the streets of Osaka sank below him. The winter sun was already close to the horizon, and the roofs he could see were half shadowed in black, creating a beautiful rectangular pattern like the go board.

When he finally arrived at the top and stepped out onto the observation platform, which offered a breathtaking three hundred and

sixty degree view, the winter wind he had not noticed so much below whipped sharply past his cheeks. Tsutenkaku was not very popular in the winter, and perhaps because it was already dusk, he could not see any another visitors on the platform.

In the little shop selling snacks and fruit and postcards, a couple sat minding the store, protected from the cold by tarpaulins stretched as windbreaks. There was nobody else. It was desolate, as if he had left the human sphere entirely and ascended to some uninhabited marginal space in the sky.

When he leaned over the railing and looked down, he could see thousands and thousands of people scurrying about like ants, contrasting with the solitude of his perch.

He stood, waiting, the cold wind whipping through, and at last the elevator returned, the steel door rattling open to reveal a kimono-clad woman with gold-rimmed spectacles whose appearance suggested she was someone's wife. Grinning, she approached Iwase.

It struck him as strange that such a genteel women should come by herself to this deserted observation platform at such an hour.

'I guess some women just like the view,' he muttered to himself as he watched.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, she laughed and spoke to him directly.

'Oh, Iwase-san! Have you forgotten me already? It's me, Midorikawa! We shared some pleasant moments together in that Tokyo hotel, remember?'

So this woman was Mme Midorikawa – the Black Lizard! She was a monster, a shape-shifter. Donning a kimono and eyeglasses, and gathering her hair into a *marumage* bun, she presented a wholly different appearance. To think that this refined woman was actually that woman thief, the Black Lizard!

Iwase felt a strong sense of hatred at her oh-so-friendly attitude, and stood silently, just staring at her beautiful visage.

'Please accept my sincere apologies for causing such a commotion,' she said, making an elegant curtsy one would not find out of place among the nobility.

'I have nothing to say to you. I've kept to every one of your conditions. You are going to return my daughter, aren't you?'

He was abrupt, refusing to play her theatrical games and getting to the heart of the matter.

'Yes. Of course ... She's doing well, please rest assured on that,' advised Mme Midorikawa. 'You did, naturally, bring the promised

item, didn't you?'

'Yes, I have it with me. Here. Check it if you like.'

He extracted a small silver box from an inner pocket, and thrust it out in front of her.

'Oh, my, thank you! I'll just take a little peek inside ...' she said calmly, taking the box from his hand. She opened the cover, sneaking a peek in behind her hand, and stared hungrily at the huge gemstone in its white velvet setting.

'... exquisite ...'

As he watched, her face gradually flushed with excitement ... the rare stone had a mysterious fascination capable of reddening the cheeks of thousands of woman thieves.

'Flames of five colours ... it truly does look like it's burning in five colours, doesn't it? How I've longed for this! Compared to this Star of Egypt, even the hundred or so diamonds I've collected through long years of work appear mere stones. Thank you ever so much!'

And she gave a long, eminently polite bow.

Although he had resigned himself to this, the more she enthused over the jewel, the more Iwase felt an indescribable hatred bubbling up inside as he thought of this woman robbing him of what he had treasured as the most important thing after his life. The woman in front of his eyes filled him with loathing and anger. And, as was this elderly merchant's wont, he gave in to the urge to express his feelings in words.

'The payment's done. All I have to do now is wait for you to deliver the goods, and I wonder if I can trust you to keep your half of the bargain. After all, I'm dealing with a thief. And there is certainly nothing more dangerous than dealing with a thief on payment-in-advance terms.'

'Oh, I will certainly keep my promise,' she laughed. 'Please, take the elevator down first. I'll be down in a bit.'

Seemingly not even noticing his insults, she announced an end to the bizarre meeting.

'Hmph. Hand over the goods and I'm no use to you any more, I see ... but wouldn't it be better if you came with me? Are you unwilling to ride the elevator with me?'

'I would so very much like to ride with you, but so many people are searching for me, and I really must watch to see that you return home safely ...'

'You mean it's not safe. You think I'd follow you? Hah! That's

downright silly. Are you afraid of me? If so you picked a pretty solitary spot to meet with me, alone. I'm a man. If I decided to, *if*, mind you, I decided to sacrifice the life of my daughter and capture this woman thief who befouls God's earth, I certainly could.'

Unable to withstand his hatred for her, he finally spoke his mind.

'Yes, I know. That's why I'm prepared for such a thing.'

Thinking she would take out a pistol, he watched as she strode sharply over to the shop, and brought back a pair of rental binoculars.

'You see that smokestack there for the public bath? Please examine the rooftop just behind it,' she said calmly, holding out the binoculars to Iwase and pointing.

'And there's something on the roof?' asked Iwase, unaccountably captured by his curiosity, putting the binoculars to his eyes.

About three blocks from the tower stood a large building. Just behind the smokestack was a wooden deck, and he could clearly see a man, a labourer by his clothes, huddled on top.

'There is a man in Western-style clothing sitting on the deck, right?'

'Yes, he's there. What of it?'

'Look more closely. What is he doing?'

'Well, how strange! He's got a pair of binoculars, and he's looking this way!'

'And doesn't he have something in his other hand?'

'Yes, he does! It looks like a red cloth. I think he's looking at us!'

'You're quite right. That's one of my men. He watching every move we make, and if anything dangerous should happen to me he will wave that red cloth to signal another of my men ... who is watching that rooftop from a different place entirely. When that happens, the second man will telephone the house where your daughter is, and your daughter will die.'

She chuckled.

'You may call me a thief, but even thievery is a profession demanding careful preparation.'

And it was indeed a clever plan. There was a reason why she had chosen this inconvenient tower top for the meeting. On the ground, it would have been impossible to observe the encounter from a safe distance.

'Hah! My sympathy for your troubles.'

While he coldly cut her off, inside he could not but admire the foolproof planning of the Black Lizard.

The Secret Lovers

Even though Mr Iwase finally did ride down by himself before her, and left in a car waiting some distance away, the Black Lizard could not relax.

Behind him stood the detested Akechi Kogorō. She could not imagine what ideas he might come up with, or what plots he might hatch.

She picked up the binoculars again, and carefully examined the throngs of people milling about at the base of the tower. She checked carefully to see if anyone was acting strangely, and while she was observing the dizzying swirls of the crowd below, she gave sway to her own inner fears.

Perhaps that man over there in the suit, looking up at the tower, was a detective? That beggar who had been sleeping there all day looked suspicious, too. Akechi's men could have disguised themselves.

With so many people, it would be easy enough for Akechi himself to adopt a disguise and walk the streets below!

Growing increasingly irritated, she walked the periphery of the observation platform, binoculars to her eyes.

She had no fear of being captured. Her enemy must surely know that the precious Sanae would lose her life if that happened. She was worried about being followed. If she was tailed by a professional, no matter how smartly she rode about, she would be unable to shake him. And Akechi was exactly such a professional at following people. If Akechi Kogorō was hiding in that crowd, and followed her to where Sanae was without being noticed ... even the Black Lizard, hardened criminal that she was, shuddered at the thought.

'I guess I'll have to do it after all,' she said to herself. 'It always pays to play it safe.'

She strode back to the shop, and called to the counterwoman.

‘I would like to ask a favour of you ... would you be willing to help me out a bit?’

The couple, a man and a woman huddled around a charcoal fire warming their hands, lifted their faces in surprise.

‘May I help you with something?’ asked the gentle-looking woman, smiling pleasantly.

‘No, I don’t want to buy anything. But I do have a request to make of you, if I may. You saw the gentleman I was speaking to a few minutes ago? He is a devil! I have been blackmailed by that criminal and something terrible could happen! Please, won’t you help me? I managed to convince him to leave, but I’m sure he’s still waiting for me at the foot of the tower! Please, I beg you! Would you pretend to be me for just a little while, and stand at the railing there? Thanks to that tarpaulin, we can exchange clothing, with you becoming me and me, you. Fortunately we are of the same age and even the same hairstyle, so I’m sure it will all go well.

‘And, kind sir, if I may beg your assistance, could you possibly escort me a little distance as though I was your wife? I would be more than happy to repay you for your time, of course! Here, you can have all the money I have! Please, I beg of you!’

She entreated them as she pulled out her wallet, extracted seven one-thousand yen notes, and pressed them into the woman’s hand in spite of her protestations.

The couple exchanged a few words with each other, but were astonished by the unexpected profit they had just gained, and readily acceded to her request without doubting her tale.

The canvas windbreaks covered the entire area, so it was a simple matter to exchange clothing in the store, totally hidden from the outside world. The pale-faced shopkeeper donned the soft kimono worn by the Black Lizard, straightened her hair, and put on the gold-rimmed spectacles, metamorphosing into a refined lady of the upper class.

And the transformation of the Black Lizard was a sight to behold. She undid her hair, then smeared dirt over her palms to smudge her entire face, turning into the perfect image of a lower-class shopkeeper’s wife. The striped kimono and stained apron went well with the dark blue *tabi* socks, which had been darned.

She gave a delighted laugh.

‘Oh, it’s wonderful! How do I look?’

‘Incredible!’ the man praised her. ‘The little woman looks like a

high-class lady, and yourself, Ma'am, you are all dirty! A wonderful job! Even your own husband wouldn't know you!

He stood comparing them with each other, flabbergasted.

'Ah, you were wearing a gauze mask, weren't you?' asked the Black Lizard. 'That would be perfect. May I borrow it?'

The white gauze mask, commonly used to prevent colds from spreading, hid her mouth entirely.

'Would you be so kind as to stand at the railing there, and look around through the binoculars, my dear?'

Then the kidnapper, disguised as a lowly shopkeeper, rode the elevator down with her 'husband' to the bustling street.

'Please hurry! It would be terrible if he found me again!'

They pushed their way through the crowd and away from the street of movie theatres, through the clumps of trees in the park toward the quiet, less crowded regions.

'Thank you so much ... I think everything's all right now. Oh, my goodness! We're acting like lovers hiding from someone!'

And indeed that is exactly what they appeared to be. The man, perhaps because of a pain in his ear, had a bandage wrapped around his head and jaw, with a deerstalker cap on top, and he was wearing a striped cotton kimono with a black shirt over it. He wore board-soled *zōri*, bound with leather straps to his bare feet. She was dressed as his wife, as mentioned before, and both wore bizarre white masks. The man took the woman's hand and they wove between the trees, trying to keep out of sight as they trotted down the road together.

'Ah! Sorry, forgive me,' apologized the man, suddenly noticing that he had been holding her hand and letting go bashfully.

'Oh, please, don't worry about it ... What happened to your head?' asked the Black Lizard, appreciative of his help in escaping her predicament.

'Just an inner ear infection,' he replied. 'It's just about healed now.'

'My goodness! You have to be careful with an ear infection,' she advised him. 'You must be happy to have such a wonderful wife. How enjoyable to be able to work together like that.'

'Her!? Nah, she's not much to talk about,' he shrugged.

'*A bit soft, this chap,*' she chuckled to herself.

'Well, I guess I'll be off now. Please thank your wife for me; I'll not forget your help today! Oh, and please tell your wife it's just an old kimono, and I'd be delighted if she kept it.'

A taxi was waiting on the avenue cutting through the park, just next

to the trees. After she left the shopkeeper, she ran for the car.

The driver hurriedly opened the door, as if he had been waiting just for her. She vanished inside and uttered a short signal, and the taxi immediately began to drive on. Surely it was driven by one of her men, who had been waiting for her there by plan.

After the shopkeeper saw the car begin to move, instead of returning to the tower he ran into the street, inexplicably, and spun about searching for something. He shot up a hand to hail a passing taxi and leaped into the empty car. He called to the driver crisply, his voice totally different from the drawl of only moments ago.

‘Follow that car! Police! I promise you a healthy tip, just do a good job of it!’

The taxi immediately moved off in pursuit, keeping a healthy distance behind.

‘Make sure they don’t notice us following them,’ the man warned the taxi driver every so often, leaning forward and staring eagerly ahead like a jockey on a racehorse.

He had identified himself as a policeman, but was he really? He certainly did not appear to be an officer of the law. His voice sounded so familiar ... no, not just his voice. Those sharp eyes staring forward from under the bandage around his head certainly seemed familiar!

The Chase

Through the grim winter dusk, the two automobiles played their bizarre game of follow-the-leader, threading their way between the host of taxis on Sakai-suji Avenue, a major north-south artery piercing Osaka, with the second car always maintaining a careful distance behind the first vehicle.

In the lead car, a beautiful young woman, dressed in the kimono and apron of a lower-class worker, sat by herself squeezed into the cushions as if hiding.

At first glance, she appeared far too poor to be using a taxi. In fact, though, this was the woman thief, the Black Lizard, in disguise!

But even this thief did not notice that just behind her another car was hot on her trail, chasing her like a wolf. In it sat a strange man dressed like a lower-class worker, head heavily bandaged, gaze locked fiercely on her car as he uttered short commands like 'Speed up!' or 'Slow down a bit!'

Who was this strange man?

Eyes fixed on the lead car, he quickly stripped off his woollen overcoat and striped kimono. From beneath, a lightly soiled khaki uniform appeared, transforming him in an instant from a shopkeeper to a factory worker.

Once he had completed his metamorphosis into a labourer, he began to tear off the bandages which had covered half his face. His face gradually emerged into view. He had not had an ear problem at all! He had merely used that as a convenient excuse to hide his face!

The line of his thick eyebrows above his piercing eyes revealed the identity of the mysterious man: it was Akechi Kogorō.

He had seen through the Black Lizard's scheme, disguising himself as the shopkeeper, waiting with determination to penetrate her secret and finally discover the whereabouts of her headquarters.

She had fallen into his trap unaware, and had even unwittingly asked him to assist in her escape! If he had wanted to apprehend her he could have done so at any time, but until they knew where the kidnapped girl was, until they discovered the Black Lizard's secret base, they could take no overt action. He quieted his racing heart, forced to suffer this prolonged pursuit. His plan was to recover both the girl and the jewel at once, and at the same time hand over the Black Lizard, the infamous woman thief, to the hands of the law.

It was dark outside now, and the cars careened past streetlamp after streetlamp, winding their tortuous way in a bizarre race through the streets of Osaka.

The cabin light was off in her car, so his only glimpse of her was a blurry image of her head through the rear window when a chance light struck. Naturally, Akechi had closed the gap between their cars as much as he thought safe.

The cars turned a corner, and there was one of the famous canals of Osaka. The shutters of a wholesalers district lined one side of the canal, while the other gently sloped upward, scattered with freight-handling machinery. The night was black, and the district surprisingly deserted for a site in huge Osaka.

The lead car slowly nosed into the darkness, and when it reached the foot of a bridge it suddenly halted under a bright streetlamp.

'Stop! Quickly!'

While Akechi was ordering the driver of his own car to stop, the other taxi had already turned around and was coming their way.

The red 'Available' light was on, visible through the windshield. The rear seat, inexplicably, was suddenly empty. Before he had a chance to even think about what had happened, the suspicious taxi had reached them. Honking rather obviously, it drove slowly past.

Akechi was able to see every part of the other taxi, only a foot away. There was no doubt that it was empty. There was no trace of the woman who had been visible until only moments ago.

Clearly, the driver was one of her men and the taxi belonged to her, but to avoid attracting the attention of the police it was camouflaged as an empty taxi, driven by a blandly smiling driver.

He debated arresting the driver, but quickly abandoned the idea because it would destroy the plan entirely. He had to find the Black Lizard! And he had to discover her hiding place!

But where in the world had that woman hidden herself? No one had alighted from the taxi when it stopped at the foot of the bridge. Under

the bright streetlamp, he could not have missed it. But only moments ago, when the car had turned onto the riverbank, she had clearly been sitting inside.

Could it be that in the half a block or so between the corner and the bridge, the kidnapper had taken advantage of the darkness to leap out of the moving taxi and hide herself? But where? Along one side was a line of commercial buildings, their giant doors shuttered for the night, and on the other side there was only the black water of the canal. Akechi stepped out of his car, and walked down and back along that half-block, checking carefully. There was nobody – not even a dog – anywhere along it.

‘Weird, huh?’ said the driver jokingly when Akechi returned, ‘Surely she didn’t jump into the canal ...’

‘The river. Perhaps she did,’ responded Akechi as he looked down from the wharf to see a large, old-style wooden boat.

There was no sign of anyone on deck, but he could see the red glare of a lantern through the oilpaper *shōji* windows in the stern. The family owning and running the boat would be living in the cabin, and when he checked he noted that the gangplank was still in place. Possibly, just possibly, the Black Lizard was hiding in the shadow of that reddish light, quieting her every breath.

It was terribly unlikely, but there was no other place she could have fled to. When it came to the Black Lizard, common sense had to be thrown out the window. Think of the unreasonable, the unlikely, and you stood a better chance of guessing correctly.

‘Can you help me out here?’ asked Akechi, handing over a bill while whispering into the driver’s ear. ‘See that window where the light’s on there? I want you to turn your lights off for a moment, and move the car so that when you turn them back on you light up that door. First though, and this is a slightly taller order, I want you to scream. Scream out for someone to help you in as loud a voice as you can, then suddenly switch on the lights. Can you do that?’

‘A pretty strange request ... Right, if that’s what you need, I’ll do it!’

The cash convinced the driver to play along, and he at once turned out the car’s headlights, then quietly moved the vehicle as directed.

Akechi, still in his factory worker’s clothes, used both hands to pick up a rock from the roadside, and scrambled down to the riverside.

‘Help! Someone, help!’

Suddenly, the driver’s scream came, sounding as if he was in deadly fear of his life.

And just at the same time, there was a loud splash as if something heavy had fallen into the canal. Akechi had thrown in the rock, but a listener would surely think that someone had dived in.

As expected, the oilpaper window on the boat opened, and a face peered out. The headlights suddenly went on, catching the person full in the face. The detective got a good look at the face even as it suddenly pulled back – it was the Black Lizard! The Black Lizard, in the form of the shopkeeper!

She could not see Akechi at all, of course. It was clear that she had not noticed them tailing her, or else she would never have stuck her head out the window.

Surprised at the disturbance, the hired labourers rattled open the windows and popped out onto the deck.

‘What was that?’

‘Probably another fight. Didn’t someone fall in?’

‘I heard something fall into the canal!’

By then, the taxi driver had already changed direction, and had driven half a block away.

Akechi ran along the riverbank to the public telephone at the foot of the bridge.

The enemy was planning on utilizing the waterway! There was no telling how far the pursuit might continue, and he had to let his comrades know what was up!

A Ghost Story

Before light the next morning, a steamer with a deadweight of less than two hundred tonnes set out from Osaka's Kawaguchi port. Thanks to the absence of any wind-swell, sailing conditions were excellent and the small vessel flew over the sea's mill-pond surface with surprising swiftness, arriving off the southern tip of the Kii Peninsula by the afternoon. However, instead of making for a harbour or toward Kii Bay, she moved straight into the Pacific Ocean bound for the Enshū Sea (off the coast of Shizuoka Prefecture). Despite her diminutive size, the daring vessel was plotting a course more likely to be taken by a large trans-Pacific liner.

From the outside, she seemed to be an ordinary scruffy freighter. Inside, though, there were no cargo holds. Underneath the hatches, the drabness of the exterior gave way to an array of amazingly luxurious cabins. Although made to look like a freighter, she was actually a passenger vessel – or rather a luxury residence.

The spacious and well-appointed cabin located near the aft was particularly impressive. It would surely be the living quarters of the ship's master.

A costly Persian rug covered the floor and hanging from the pure white ceiling was a chandelier so exquisite you would not imagine you were aboard a ship. In addition, there was an ornate wardrobe, a round table with a tablecloth, a sofa, and a few armchairs.

However, the harmony was spoilt by a sofa in the corner whose clashing pattern made it stand out.

But wait! Have we not seen this sofa somewhere before? Aha! See the mark where a rent has been darned? It must be *that* sofa. The one that was borne off from Iwase's drawing room three days previously after Sanae had been shoved inside. But why would it be on board this ship?

And given that the sofa is on the vessel, could it be that ... But there can be no doubt. For so absorbed have we been with the sofa that we have overlooked the person sitting on it. How could we forget this sombre beauty? Lustrous are the black silk Western clothes through which her ample form shows and sparkling the jewels in her ears, at her breast, and on her fingers. The Black Lizard! The lady thief who twenty-four hours ago had hidden behind the oil-paper *shōji* on a large old-style wooden boat, unaware that she was being tailed by Akechi.

Overnight, the wooden vessel concealing the lady thief had rowed down the Edagawa and Ōgawa rivers to Kawaguchi, where the Black Lizard had transferred to the steamer which was moored there for the night.

So what kind of vessel was this small steamer? If it was an ordinary trading ship, a female robber would not be lording it in the best cabin as if it was her own. Could it be, by any chance, that the Black Lizard is the vessel's owner?

If so, that would explain the presence of the 'human chair'. And if this is the 'human chair', then perhaps Sanae, who had been enclosed inside the sofa, is now being held captive somewhere on board.

However that may be, we must now adjust our gaze to take in the doorway of the cabin where another character stands.

If this was a normal trading vessel, the seaman's cap with its gold-braid insignia and the black-piped uniform buttoned up to the chin would suggest he might be the ship's purser. But haven't we seen this chap somewhere too? That squashy nose and sturdy frame make him look just like a boxer ... Yes, it's him – the criminal pugilist who disguised himself as Dr Yamakawa and kidnapped Sanae in Tokyo's Keiō Hotel, the underling who pledged his life to the Black Lizard – Amamiya Jun'ichi, Jun-chan, in a new guise.

'What? Don't tell me you're worried about it as well. You're a grown man and yet you're afraid of ghosts? Dear oh dear!'

A sardonic smile could be seen on the Black Lizard's beautiful face as she reclined leisurely on the sofa.

'I tell you, I'm getting the creeps. There's something strange going on. And everyone on board, every single one of them, is becoming superstitious. I bet you'd be frightened too if you heard that thing whispering away out of sight.'

There was fear in the 'pursers' eyes as he swayed from side to side with the motion of the ship.

Inside the cabin, the chandelier shone brightly, but beyond the

single metal plate forming the wall, night had fallen and all that could be seen was black water. Black sky. Although it was quiet, swells with mountainous peaks came sweeping in at intervals. And when they did, the small frail craft rocked helplessly in the infinite darkness like a fallen leaf.

‘What exactly has happened? Tell me the details. Who saw this ghost?’

‘Nobody has actually seen it. But Kitamura and Gōda say they definitely heard its voice at different times. So it’s not just one person – two people have heard the same voice.’

‘Where?’

‘In our “guest’s” cabin.’

‘Sanae’s cabin?’

‘That’s right. Today around lunchtime, Kitamura heard somebody whispering in a low voice inside the cabin when he walked past the door. It was when you, me, and the rest were all in the dining room. Sanae was gagged so she couldn’t have said anything. Thinking it might be one of the crew playing a prank, he went to open the door but it was still locked on the outside. Kitamura says he thought something wasn’t right so he hurried to get the key and tried to open the door.’

‘So the little lady had taken off her gag, right? And then I suppose she probably started muttering curses.’

‘But the gag was still firmly in place. And the rope binding her hands didn’t appear particularly loose. Of course, there was nobody in the cabin apart from her. Kitamura says he shuddered when he realized that.’

‘Well, did he ask Sanae?’

‘Yes, he took off the gag to ask her, but she was terrified herself and said she didn’t know a thing.’

‘A peculiar story. I wonder if it’s true.’

‘I wondered too. Assuming that Kitamura’s ears had played a trick on him, I didn’t think any more of it. But strangely enough, just an hour ago, again when we were all in the dining room, Gōda heard the voice. He also says he went to get the key and opened the door. Just as in Kitamura’s case, there was no sign of anyone else in the room and there was nothing unusual about Sanae’s gag. News of this second eerie happening spread among the crew pretty quickly and now it’s become one of those ghost stories that teachers are so good at telling.’

‘What are they saying?’

‘Well you know this lot have all got shady pasts. Two or three of them have even done time for murder. They can sense the spirit world. To tell you the truth, it even gives me the shivers to hear that a vengeful ghost is stalking this ship.’

Another big swell came through and the hull lifted higher and higher making a strange low sound, before finally sinking into the bottomless pit.

At that precise moment, perhaps due to generator trouble, the light in the chandelier turned a brownish red and began blinking dully as if sending some sort of signal.

‘What a horrid evening,’ Jun’ichi muttered, looking fearfully at the flickering light.

‘And you a grown man! What a cry-baby!’

The laughter from the woman in the black dress echoed eerily from the steel-plated hull.

Just then, as if in reply to the woman’s laugh, the door slid open and something white came in. It wore a white flat cap, a white button-up jacket, and a white apron. The fat face, which resembled that of a chubby good-luck god, looked anxious. This was the ship’s cook.

‘Oh, it’s you is it? What’s wrong with you? You gave me a fright.’

In response to Jun’ichi’s scolding, the cook began to quietly report what had happened with the utmost seriousness.

‘Something weird’s happened again. This ghost thing has been sneaking around in the galley. A whole chicken is missing.’

‘A chicken?’

Asked the woman in black dubiously.

‘Yeah, but it wasn’t alive or anything! There were seven plucked, boiled chickens hanging inside the pantry door. Exactly seven. I saw them there when I was preparing lunch. But when I looked a while ago, one was gone. There were only six birds.’

‘We didn’t have chicken at dinner, did we?’

‘No, and that’s why it’s strange. Nobody on this boat is a big eater. There’s nobody who would steal something like that – unless we’re talking about a ghost.’

‘Are you sure you aren’t mistaken?’

‘No way! Actually, I’ve got a very sharp memory.’

‘This is strange now, isn’t it Jun-chan? Why don’t you all split up and search the ship. Maybe there is something on board.’

After the series of weird events, even the lady thief felt uneasy.

‘Yes, I was thinking that too. Whether it’s a spirit of the dead or the

living, it must be something corporeal if it's speaking and stealing food. If we do a thorough search we might be able to find out the identity of this ghost.'

The 'purser' then left the cabin to give instructions for the search of the vessel.

Suddenly remembering, the cook then said to his lady-chief, 'Oh, and then there was a message from the pretty young miss.'

'From Sanae, you mean?'

'Yes, just a moment ago, when I took her meal in. I untied her hands and took off the gag and I don't know what had changed today but she wolfed the whole lot down as if she was really enjoying it. Then she asked me not to tie her up, promising that she wouldn't make a fuss and scream.'

'She said that she would behave?'

The woman in black asked in surprise.

'That's what she says. According to her, she's completely changed her mind. She's very cheerful. You wouldn't think she was the same young lady as yesterday, she's altered so much.'

'Mmm, how peculiar. Tell Kitamura to bring her here, would you.'

The cook left to do as ordered. A short while later, Sanae was led into the cabin by the crewman called Kitamura, who was holding her unbound hand.

The Frightful Enigma

Sanae looked terribly strained. The plain silk clothes she had been wearing when she was kidnapped were now all crumpled and creased. Loose strands from her dishevelled hair covered her pale brow and her cheeks were hollow. The bent temple-pieces of her eyeglasses made them hang awkwardly from her nose, which seemed slightly more prominent.

‘How do you feel, Sanae? Don’t stand over there – come and sit beside me.’ The woman in black spoke gently, motioning with her finger to the sofa on which she sat.

‘Fine.’

Meekly doing as she was bid, Sanae advanced two or three steps. However, when she recognized the sofa on which the woman in black was sitting a look of fear came into her face and letting out a gasp as if she had seen a ghost she began to back up.

The ‘human chair’. The terrifying memory of being stuffed inside that dreadful chair three days ago came vividly into her mind.

‘Oh, this thing is it? You’re afraid of the sofa? Well, I guess you’ve got reason to be. Why don’t you sit in that armchair over there?’

Sanae sat down in the armchair diffidently.

‘I’m sorry for having made such a commotion. From now on, I’ll do whatever you say. I apologize.’

Sanae whispered the apology with her head hung low.

‘Well, you’ve finally had a change of heart. That’s good. It’s to your advantage to quietly go along with things this way. Still, it seems a little strange that you were putting up such resistance until yesterday and suddenly you’re all meek and mild. Why? Is there some reason?’

‘No, not really ...’

Darting a shrewd look at the drooping Sanae, the lady thief shifted to her next question.

‘Kitamura and Gōda say that they’ve heard voices in your cabin. Did somebody enter? Please tell me the truth.’

‘No, I haven’t noticed anything. I didn’t hear anything.’

‘Sanae, are you lying?’

‘No, I swear ...’

The Black Lizard appeared to be considering something as she stared at Sanae. The eerie silence continued for a while.

Then Sanae shyly asked, ‘Um, this boat, where is it going?’

‘This boat?’

Starting from her meditative pause, the lady thief continued, ‘Let me tell you the boat’s destination. Presently, we are travelling across the Enshū Sea en route for Tokyo. I have my own private art museum in a secret location in the capital. Hee, hee, hee! And I’d like you to see it. To see what a wonderful museum it is ... We’re speeding there like this so that I can display you and the Star of Egypt.

‘It would be quicker to go by train, but it would be too dangerous to transport live cargo like you over land. A ship might be a little slow, but it’s completely safe. And this ship, my dear, is mine. You see, your friendly little old Black Lizard has even got a steamship all ready for use. I expect that surprises you. Yes, you see I have the finances to be able to use a vessel like this as I please. When we can’t go by land, we use this boat. Without such a splendid tool, I can’t think how I could have stayed out of reach of the law for so long.’

‘But, I ...’

Sanae glanced up at the woman in black stubbornly.

‘But what?’

‘I don’t want to go to such a place.’

‘Well I’m not expecting you to want to go there. You might not like it, but I’m going to take you.’

‘No, I will not go ...’

‘Well, you seem to be very sure of yourself. You aren’t planning to try and escape from the ship, are you?’

‘I have faith. I believe that I will be saved. I’m not afraid in the least.’

The woman in black could not help but be a little startled at the confidence in Sanae’s voice.

‘Faith in who? Who is going to save you?’

‘Don’t you know?’

While hinting at some impenetrable enigma, Sanae’s voice also contained a conviction of puzzling strength. But whose power had

conferred such strength into this fragile young lady?

What if ... what if ... The Black Lizard's face gradually turned horribly pale.

'Oh. I think I've got an idea. Let's see shall we. Would it happen to be Akechi Kogorō?'

'Well ...'

Caught off guard, Sanae seemed a little flustered.

'I've guessed it, haven't I? The person who has been hiding in your room keeping your spirits up. Everyone says it's a ghost, but a ghost wouldn't be talking. It's Akechi Kogorō, isn't it? The private eye has promised to save you, hasn't he?'

'No, of course not.'

'Don't try to deceive me. All right, there's nothing more I want to hear from you.'

Her face as dark as thunder, the woman in black stood straight up.

'Kitamura, tie her up as before, gag her, and lock her in the cabin. I want you to lock the door from the inside and keep guard until I say it's all right. Get yourself a pistol. I don't care what happens – I won't allow her to escape.'

'As you say. I'll obey your instructions.'

Once Kitamura had dragged Sanae off, the Black Lizard rushed out into the corridor where she bumped into the 'purser' who was just then returning after completing the search.

'Oh, Jun-chan. I found out the true identity of the ghost – it's Akechi. It seems that he's lurking on the boat somewhere. I want you to search the ship again. Come on, hop to it!'

So another major search of the vessel took place. With flashlights waving, ten of the crew separately combed the decks, the aft, the engine-room, the ventilation shafts, and even the floor of the coal bunker. But they did not see anybody or find any clue.

Burial at Sea

The black-garbed leader returned to her cabin empty-handed, and slumped into the sofa, lost in contemplation as she tried to solve the strange riddle she had been presented.

Oblivious to all these happenings, the ship's engine continued to throb away, pushing the boat through the dark air and sea at full speed, toward the east.

The pulse of the engine vibrating through the boat, the sound of the waves beating incessantly on the gunwales, and the crash of a whitecap hitting the boat when least expected.

The Black Lizard leaned on one arm of the sofa, staring at the rents in its fabric as if looking at something fearsome.

She was unable to shake one particular fear, try as she might. It was the only possibility left, wasn't it? They had searched every other possible nook and cranny. All that was left, a blind spot none of them had thought to search, was inside the sofa ...

As she calmed herself, she thought that she felt a tiny beat, quite different from the throb of the engine, against her skin, transmitted through the cushion.

It was a beating human heart: the pulse of whoever was hiding inside the sofa.

She grew pale, and gritted her teeth together, holding in check her instinct to flee.

Even as she sat, though, it seemed that the heartbeat from the sofa was growing steadily louder. She could no longer hear the sound of the waves or the engine – all she could hear was the heartbeat from under her seat, the unknown pulsation echoing eerily, amplified as a drum to her ears.

She could not stand it! But she would never run away, never! Even if that man was hiding inside the sofa, he was just a rat caught in a bag,

was he not? Nothing to be scared of, nothing to be frightened of at all.
'Akechi-san, Akechi-san!' she called out in a loud determined voice, as she pounded on the cushions.

And a sombre voice sounded back from within the sofa!

'Like a shadow, I just can't be kept away from you. This trick sofa you built was enormously helpful.'

The melancholy voice, echoing as if from the depths of the earth, or from the wall itself, made the woman in black shiver in spite of herself.

'Aren't you a bit concerned, Akechi-san? These are all my people, here. You are on the open sea, far beyond the reach of the police. Aren't you scared?'

'It looks to me as if you are the one who's frightened,' he chuckled.

What a horrible laugh it was. He made no effort to emerge from the sofa, seemingly perfectly at ease. This man was unfathomable.

'Frightened? No. But I am impressed. How did you know it was this boat?'

'I didn't, but by sticking so close to you, this is where I ended up, quite naturally.'

'So close to me? I don't understand ...'

'I'm confident there is only one man who could have followed you here from the top of the Tsutenkaku Tower.'

'Oh, really? How wonderful! I'm so proud of you! So that shop owner was really Akechi Kogorō ... How silly I was! It must have been so funny when I believed your story about an inner ear infection and that bandage.'

Driven by some strange emotion, she had the weird illusion that the man lying stretched out under her seat was not her enemy, but almost a lover.

'Hmm, rather ... I have to admit that it was enjoyable disguising myself to you, as you tried so hard to disguise yourself.'

Suddenly, in the midst of this bizarre conversation, the door abruptly swung open, and Amamiya Jun'ichi the 'purser' stepped in. Apparently he had heard the conversing voices and thought it suspicious.

Before he had a chance to say anything, the Black Lizard put her finger to her lips and commanded silence. She beckoned him closer, then took a pencil and memo pad from her handbag, which lay on the end table nearby. Her hand flew over the page, writing rapidly as she continued her innocuous-seeming conversation with Akechi.

'AKECHI INSIDE SOFA,' she wrote, even as she asked him 'So that strange

scream and the splash at the bridge were your doing, then?’

‘CALL EVERYONE. HURRY. BRING STRONG ROPE.’

‘As you have surmised. If you hadn’t looked out the oilpaper window, probably none of this would have happened.’

‘Ah, as I feared ... And how did you follow us after that?’

As she spoke, Jun’ichi slipped silently out of the room.

‘I borrowed a bicycle, and just pedalled along from bank to bank, keeping your vessel in sight from land. I waited for dawn, and then asked a small boat to ferry me out here. In the twilight I managed to crawl up on your deck, although it took some acrobatics to accomplish.’

‘But there was a lookout on deck, wasn’t there?’

‘Yes. That’s why it took me so long to get into the cabins. It was quite difficult to discover which room Sanae was being held in. And, of course, by the time I did find her,’ he chuckled, ‘the boat had already set sail!’

‘Why didn’t you flee when you had the chance?’ she asked. ‘You must have known you’d be found here.’

‘Brr! The water’s a bit too chilly for me, I’m afraid, and I can’t swim all that well. It was just so much easier to lie down here under these warm cushions!’

What a bizarre conversation! One party was lying inside the sofa in the blackness, while the other was sitting on top of those same cushions – they were almost close enough to feel each other’s body heat! And even stranger, they were mortal enemies! They would leap at each other’s throats like fierce tigers given the slightest opening. In spite of which, they conversed quietly, gently, almost like the bedtime talk of man and wife.

‘You know, I’ve been hidden away here since dinnertime, and I’m quite bored with it all. And I’d really love to see your beautiful face once again, too. Mind if I come out?’ Akechi was bolder than ever, no doubt with some clever plan in mind.

‘You mustn’t! You must not come out! If my men find you, you’re dead. Just be quiet a little longer.’

‘Really? So you’ll cover up for me, will you?’

Just then young Jun’ichi returned, accompanied by five crew members carrying a stout rope. They entered cautiously, silently.

‘LEAVE AKECHI IN SOFA, TIE ROPE AROUND OUTSIDE. THROW SOFA AND ALL OFF DECK.’

They followed her directions without making a sound, and began to

wind the rope around the sofa starting from one end. Smiling evilly, the Black Lizard stood up to get out of their way.

‘Hey, what happened? Has someone come?’ asked Akechi, unaware of what was happening but sensing that something had changed in the room outside the sofa.

‘Yes. We’re tying the sofa up with rope.’

The sofa was almost completely bound up.

‘Rope!?’

‘That’s right,’ snarled the Black Lizard, revealing her true maliciousness. ‘We’re tying up the famous private detective right now! Ha, ha, ha!’

She drew herself up, confronting him as if a pitch-black demon, and spat out the words with venom that ill suited a woman.

‘Pick up the sofa! To the deck!’

The six men easily lifted the sofa and hurried it through the hallway to the deck. Like a pitiful fish caught in a net, the detective inside struggled to free himself.

Up above the deck, the night was black and starless, both sky and sea a featureless darkness. Stirred up by the ship’s screw, a single ribbon of phosphorescence stretched out, a long and eerily pale streamer.

The six stood at the gunwale, carrying the coffin-like sofa.

‘One ... two ... and three!’

With the shout a black shadow fell down over the gunwale, ending in a pale splash of phosphorescence. The famous private detective Akechi Kogorō had finally, without a fight, sunk deep into the waters of the Pacific Ocean.

The Underground Treasure House

The sofa holding Akechi twirled and jumped like something alive in the phosphorescent wake of the ship, and its black shape sank out of sight under the waves almost immediately.

‘I guess that’s what they call a burial at sea. And that takes care of the last obstacle in our path! Still, it’s sad to think of the spirited Akechi Kogorō becoming mere fish food at the bottom of the sea, isn’t it?’

Amamiya Jun’ichi was staring into her eyes as he spoke with sugar-coated grief.

‘Who cares? All right, everyone. Back inside!’

She herded all the men back inside the ship, as if scolding them, then turned to lean on the deck railing, alone, gazing fixedly at the sea where the sofa had vanished.

The sound of the ship’s screw, the whitecaps marching past with identical shapes, the phosphorescence of the ship’s wake ... Whether the ship was moving or the water flowing around it, around her was nought but the uncaring and unchanging rhythm.

The Black Lizard stood, immobile, for half an hour in the cold night wind. When she finally went below, her face was a horrible bluish tone in the bright ship’s lights. The traces of tears shone on her cheeks.

She went to her own cabin for a moment, and, seemingly unable to bear being there either, soon stepped into the corridor and walked unsteadily toward the room where Sanae was imprisoned.

She knocked, and the crewman named Kitamura opened the door, peering out.

‘Go for a little walk, Kitamura ... I’ll look after Sanae for a bit,’ she ordered, and after Kitamura left she stepped inside.

Poor Sanae! Her hands were tied up behind her, and she was gagged, lying on her side in a corner of the room. The Black Lizard

removed the gag and spoke to her.

‘I have something I must tell you, Sanae. It’s very bad news, I’m afraid, and I’m sure you’ll burst into tears.’

Sanae sat up, and, silently, stared back at the kidnapper with enmity in her eyes.

‘Do you know what I’m about to tell you?’

‘...’

‘Ha, ha, ha! Akechi Kogorō, your guardian angel, is dead! He was hiding in that sofa, and we tied it up with rope and sank him in the sea! We threw him into a watery grave just now from the deck! Ha, ha, ha!’

Sanae reeled, shocked, and stared up at the face of the Black Lizard, who continued to laugh like a madwoman.

‘Is that true?’

‘You think I’d be so happy at a mere lie, child? Look at me! I’m so happy I can’t bear it! But you must be very disappointed, mustn’t you? Your only friend, your only lifeline, has been cut. There is no one in this whole wide world who can help you now. You’ll be locked in my art museum for ever, never again to see the light of day!’

Staring at the face of her tormentor, Sanae realized that this dreadful news was not a lie. And she understood just what the death of the detective meant for her.

It was hopeless. The despair of her hopeless situation was as deep as her faith in Akechi had been strong. She was all too well aware that she was entirely by herself, trapped among her enemies.

She bit her lip and tried to be brave, but she was unable to withstand it any more. With her hands tied behind her, she bent over to hide her face against her legs, and began to weep. The hot tears dripped onto her legs.

‘Stop crying! How shameful! Have you no manners at all?’

Seeing her begin to cry, the Black Lizard scolded her in a curiously high voice. Suddenly she was kneeling at Sanae’s side and tears were streaming down the kidnapper’s face as well! Whether it was the loneliness of losing her ultimate enemy, or perhaps for some other reason, she was drowning in a strange, unfathomable sadness.

Somehow, without knowing how, the kidnapper and the kidnapped, the Black Lizard and her prey, these mortal enemies, were sitting, holding each other’s hands like close sisters and weeping! The causes of their sadness were different, but there was no difference in the depth and intensity of their sorrow.

The Black Lizard was wailing like a child of five or six years and this led Sanae-san to weep in the same uncontrolled way. What an unexpected and unbelievable scene! They were nothing more than two young girls, or perhaps two innocent barbarians. With no trace of intellect or emotion, they exposed only the sheer passion of their sadness.

This strange paean of grief blended with the monotone of the engine, and continued on and on. They wept and wept until the natural evil awoke in the Black Lizard's breast once again, and Sanae recalled her enmity.

In the evening of the following day the ship entered Tokyo Bay, dropping anchor along the coast of the former landfill known as Tsukishima Island.

They waited for it to grow dark, then lowered the ship's launch, and several people boarded to row to a deserted point on the island.

Leaving the three oarsmen in the launch, the Black Lizard disembarked with Sanae and Amamiya Jun'ichi. With her hands still tied behind her back and her mouth gagged, Sanae also wore a thick blindfold. No doubt these precautions were designed to prevent her from discovering the way to the Black Lizard's hideout. Jun'ichi no longer wore an officer's dress, and he had donned a beard and moustache to hide his face. Wearing a khaki workman's uniform, he looked like a factory machinist.

Tsukishima was a spacious island packed with factories, and had almost no residences. With the recent industrial slump almost none of them were operating at this time of night, and the only sources of light were the scattered white streetlamps. It looked like a deserted ruin.

The three of them crossed a wide grassy area running along the coast, and wove a complicated course amid the buildings, finally entering a ruined factory.

The walls were broken, the gate columns leaned, and the grounds were covered with weeds grown wild in what looked like a haunted factory. There was no light, of course, so the Black Lizard took out her flashlight and lit their steps through the weeds. Behind her came Jun'ichi in his workman's garb, carrying blindfolded Sanae on his back.

Ten or twelve metres from the gate was a large wooden structure, and the light from the flashlight flowed caressingly over its surface. There were many glass windows, but the glass had broken and fallen from every single frame. She rattled the door open, and stepped into

the cobweb-choked interior.

The flashlight beam danced over broken machinery, rusty shafts running above their heads, drive wheels and broken drive belts, finally stopping on a little room in one corner, that looked like it could have been the supervisor's office.

The three of them stepped through the broken glass door, and up onto the wooden floor.

'Tic tac tac ... tic tic tac tic ... tac ... tac ...'

The Black Lizard kicked the floor sharply with her shoe heel. Surely it could not be Morse code!? But it was a signal of some sort, because before the tapping of her heel had died away, a metre-wide section of the flooring in the circle of light slid open silently, exposing the concrete below. The very ground itself was built as a door, a thick block which dropped down to reveal a black underground passage.

'M'lady?'

A low voice sounded from below.

'Yes. And I've brought an important guest with me today.'

Remaining silent, Amamiya descended the steps to the passage, with Sanae still on his back, treading with care, one step at a time. After the Black Lizard herself followed him down the stairs, the concrete door and wooden floorboards closed up once again, leaving only a dark, ruined factory with no trace that anything out of the ordinary had happened.

The Art Museum Terror

Because her eyes were tightly bound when she was transferred from the main vessel to the launch, Sanae had no idea where they had landed, where she walked to afterward, or whether the place where she now found herself was above or below ground.

‘We’ve given you rather a hard time, haven’t we Sanae-san? Well, it’s over now. Jun-chan, set her free.’

After Sanae heard the Black Lizard’s kind-sounding voice, she felt the gag being removed and the ropes on both hands being untied. Then her eyes were flooded with light. Because they had been bound tightly by the dark blindfold for so long, the brightness was dazzling.

She was in a long, curved corridor whose ceiling, floor, and walls were made of concrete. A splendid cut-glass chandelier hung from the ceiling and its bright flashing rays illuminated rows of glass display cases arrayed along both walls. Inside the cases, jewels of varying shapes caught the chandelier’s beams like countless flickering stars.

In the face of such beauty and magnificence, Sanae forgot she was a prisoner and inadvertently gasped. The daughter of a major jewel trader, she was accustomed to the point of boredom to seeing precious stones each day, but even so she raised her voice in surprise. We shall spare the reader a detailed explanation of the high quality and great number of the jewels gathered there.

‘Thank you for being impressed. You see, this is my art museum. Rather, the entrance to it. What do you think? I’m sure you’ll agree these display cases would not suffer in comparison with those at your showroom. It has taken me decades of risking my life, racking my wits, and daring all kinds of peril to collect these stones. I’m sure you wouldn’t find so many, even in the jewel vaults of the most exalted nobility in the world.’

As she delivered her boastful speech, the woman in black carefully

opened the handbag she was carrying and took out a little silver box containing the Star of Egypt.

‘I feel a little sorry for your father, but I’ve desired this for a long time. Today, it has finally come to rest in my art museum.’

She clicked open the lid of the small box to reveal the giant stone, which flamed with colour in the chandelier’s rays. The Black Lizard regarded it with delight before pulling out a bunch of keys from her handbag. Unlocking the glass door of a display stand, she placed the massive diamond in the centre, still inside the open silver box.

‘Oh my, how beautiful it is! Compared to this, other jewels seem like mere pebbles. Now my art museum has one more treasure. Thank you, Sanae-san.’

There was no irony intended, but it was difficult for Sanae to know how to reply. She remained silent with her eyes cast down.

‘All right, let’s go further in. I still have many things to show you.’

As they moved along the subterranean passage, they beheld a space lined with famous old paintings, beside that a group of statues of the Buddha, then Western marble sculptures, followed by ancient-looking craftwork. So rich was the display of objects that this indeed seemed to be an art museum.

According to the woman in black, the majority of these art objects had been taken from museums, art galleries, and the treasure vaults of wealthy nobles in every land and replaced with skilfully made copies.

If this was true, the objects so proudly displayed by museums and passed down through the generations as treasures by wealthy nobles were fakes. The wonder of it was that neither the owners nor the general public had even the slightest suspicion about this.

‘Still, this is only an impressive private museum. Any thief with enough wits and financial resources could do the same. I have no intention of boasting about it. What I really want to show you is still further along.’

They rounded a corner in the passage and a peculiar sight completely unlike any they had yet seen came into view.

What! These must be wax mannequins. But how finely they are made.

One of the walls contained a glass display like a show window about six metres wide. Inside were a blonde woman, a black man, as well as a young Japanese man and woman. All four were naked and in various poses, standing, crouching, or lying down.

The black man looked like a boxer, standing straight up with his

muscular arms crossed. Squatting with her elbows on her knees, the blonde propped up her chin with her hands. The Japanese girl, who lay stretched out on her stomach with her flowing black hair falling in waves on her shoulders, rested her chin on her folded arms and stared at the onlookers. The young Japanese man was poised like a discus thrower and every muscle in his body stood out in relief. All four were fine-featured, well-proportioned, and beautiful beyond compare.

‘Magnificent lifelike mannequins, don’t you think? But perhaps a little too lifelike, no? Move a little closer to the glass. See the fine downy hair on their skin. I bet you’ve never heard of mannequins having fine body hair.’

Overcome by curiosity, Sanae neared the glass plate. Such was the mysterious attraction of the figures that she forgot about the awfulness of her predicament.

My! They really were covered in downy hair. And the colour of the skin as well as the fine, fine wrinkles! Could something so convincing be a wax model?

‘Do you believe these are wax mannequins, Sanae-san?’

Smiling oddly, the woman in black seemed to be teasing Sanae. Something in the question frightened the young woman.

‘There’s something about them that differs from a mannequin, something frightening, don’t you think? Have you ever seen a stuffed animal? Didn’t you ever think it would be wonderful if a method could be invented for preserving beautiful humans for ever in just that way? Well, that is what has happened. One of my underlings devised a method for stuffing humans. What you see here are prototypes. They’re not completely perfect, but they’re not lifeless wax dolls. I think you’ll agree they seem lifelike. Naturally, the inside is wax, but the skin and hair are truly human. They seem to possess souls. The human scent remains. Isn’t it fantastic? To stuff beautiful young people as they are, to preserve for ever the beauty that would surely be lost if they lived – there’s not a museum that could do it or would even think of doing it.’

Carried away by her own words, the woman in black had launched into a speech.

‘All right, come this way now. There’s a much grander exhibit further along. Although these may seem lifelike and appear to possess souls, they cannot move. Deeper in, there’s one that is full of movement.’

Sanae was guided around another corner. And there she saw on display an artwork that moved, completely unlike the still scenes they

had seen thus far.

There was a cage with thick iron bars like those used for lions or tigers, and shut up inside, along with an electric heater glowing red, was a man.

He was a handsome Japanese youth some twenty-four or twenty-five years old and he bore a striking resemblance to a well-known movie actor.

He had been placed inside the cage like a fine specimen of a wild beast, with his perfectly balanced body exposed to full view.

He was pacing around inside the enclosure pulling at his hair with both hands, but when he saw the woman in black he shook the bars and screamed loudly like a monkey in the zoo.

‘Wait, you slut! Are you trying to send me crazy, you bitch? Just kill me quickly. I don’t want to spend another day alive inside this cage. Open up you! Let me out ...’

Slipping his white arm between the bars, he tried to seize the dark garb of the lady thief.

‘Well now, I don’t think you need to get so angry. What a mess you’ve made of your pretty face. But I’ll soon grant your wish and choke the life out of you. And I’ll turn you into an ageless doll, just like Keiko-san who was with you in this cell until a short while ago. Ha, ha, ha!’

The woman in black laughed cruelly.

‘What’s that you say?! You’ve made Keiko-san a doll! Oh you bitch, you’ve gone and killed her and stuffed her ... Well, you’re not going to make me into any doll! I’m not your toy. You make the slightest move toward me and I’ll kill you with my teeth without a trace of mercy. I’ll maul your throat and suffocate you to death.’

‘Hee, hee, hee. You’d better make as much of a commotion as you can now because once I’ve turned you into a doll you’ll be as motionless as a stone. What’s more, there’s nothing I enjoy more than seeing a handsome boy kicking up such a ruckus. Ha, ha, ha!’

Relishing the youth’s agony, the woman in black progressed to a fresh horror.

‘You must be very sad since Keiko-san left. In most zoos, there’s usually a male and a female of the species in each cage. Well, I’ve been thinking for a while now that I should do something about getting you a young lady and I’ve tried all sorts of things. Today, I’ve finally brought along a bride for you. What do you think? She’s beautiful, isn’t she? Do you like her?’

Sanae felt a cold shudder and she could not stop her jaw from trembling.

Now the Black Lizard's evil scheme had become entirely clear. She had gone to such trouble to kidnap the beautiful Sanae in order to strip her naked, thrust her into this cage and then, when the time came, to peel off her living skin and put her on display in this evil art museum as a horrible stuffed doll.

'Sanae-san! What's wrong? You're trembling. Why, you're shaking just like a reed! So you understand your role now, hmmn? But the groom isn't too bad, is he? Or doesn't he appeal? Well, I've decided, so you'll just have to put up with it whether you like him or not.'

Overcome by fear, Sanae had lost the power of speech. It was all she could do to stand. Her mind went blank. Shaking, she looked as if she might fall at any minute.

The Big Tank

‘Sanae-san, there’s still something I want to show you. Come this way. This time it’s not a zoo, but an aquarium. I’m very proud of it.’

Taking the quivering Sanae by the hand, the Black Lizard pulled her upright and they turned the next corner.

Here the long subterranean passage came to an end and there was a large glass-lined tank beyond. A very bright light had been fixed directly above the tank, making the objects in the water so clear through the thick glass it seemed one could reach out and touch them.

The tank measured about two metres on all sides and on its bottom countless fronds of strange seaweed were waving together like snakes.

But why did she call it an aquarium? There was no sign of any fish.

‘You can’t see any fish, can you? Don’t be puzzled. After all, there were no animals in my zoo so why should it seem strange that there aren’t any fish in my aquarium?’

The woman in black laughed eerily before launching into another ghastly speech.

‘I think it’ll be fun to put a human inside. You know how much more interesting they are than fish. That fellow in the cage who got himself into such a tizzy might be handsome, but just think about the magnificent submarine dance a person thrown into this tank would perform ...’

Then it was no longer the woman in black’s voice – Sanae’s field of vision was filled with a vivid monster-movie spectre. Something white was writhing in the gloomy water. Suddenly, from the squirming mass of raised serpentine heads, a large human face appeared at the glass, the mouth hanging open, gasping for breath like a *koi* carp. The eyes were shut and the brows drawn down ... the face was not a man’s. Nor that of an old person. It was a young woman ... but wait, this was definitely no stranger. For writhing there among the snakes was none

other than Sanae herself!

‘It’s wonderful, don’t you think? What a superb show! There isn’t a classic painting, or a sculpture, or even an inspired performance of Japanese dance that has expressed such beauty. This is art in exchange for life ...’

But Sanae was no longer listening to the ghastly declamation. She could not hold her breath that long. In the vision, she had inhaled copious amounts of water. She struggled with all her might until finally all her energy was spent. Then the fear and suffering became too great for her to bear and she fainted.

Realizing what had happened, the woman in black put out both hands to support Sanae but the young woman was now as limp as a jellyfish and she collapsed onto the concrete floor.

The White Beasts

Sanae had no idea how much time had passed, but when she finally awoke and opened her eyes, the first thing she felt was that her body was directly exposed to the air. When she touched herself, her finger slid freely, with nothing to catch on. Her prostrate body had been stripped stark naked!

Next she noticed the countless thick steel bars crossed in front of her like stripes. She knew only too well what they were. She was in a cage. They had put her in a cell while she was unconscious.

It must be the same cage she had seen before she fainted, the one that young man had been imprisoned in. So she was not here alone? That beautiful young man, as naked as she was herself, should be nearby.

When she recalled that much, she totally lost the courage to lift her head and look around. What to do? She had not a stitch on her body! And even worse! She was stretched out in that embarrassing state in front of a young, beautiful and naked man!

But instead of blushing, she turned white as a ghost, sat up abruptly, curled up into a ball, and scuttled backward into the corner. And no matter how she tried to look the other way, in such a cramped cell there was no way to prevent certain sights from entering her field of view quite naturally. And she saw him. The naked man.

In that underground cell together, like Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, they exchanged glances. What could she say? And what could she do? Ashamed at her nakedness, Sanae's eyes overflowed with tears. Through the dancing lights in her tears she could make out the shining, white body of the man.

'Do you feel all right?'

Suddenly a mellow bass voice echoed – it was the young man!

She started, blinked her eyes to clear away the tears, and looked at

his face.

Right in front of her was a white face, as silkily smooth as if oiled. A high, wide brow; soft, curly hair; double eyelids and clear eyes looking into hers; a Grecian nose; and firm red lips ... he was truly a beautiful young man, but Sanae was terrified.

Had the Black Lizard given her to this man as his bride? Maybe the young man had that intent! And as that thought occurred to her, she once again had to face the fact that the two of them were trapped in this cage together, naked like beasts of the field ... it was enough to freeze the blood in her body!

‘Miss, there’s nothing to worry about! Despite appearances, I’m not a barbarian, really!’

He spoke hesitantly, bashfully. Sanae’s fear dissipated as she heard his words.

As they came to understand each other a little better, they began to discuss their plight, cursing the evil plot of their female kidnapper, huddling closer and closer to each other like white beasts as they whispered together.

At last it seemed that dawn had broken, for they began to feel the people around them stirring in this underground keep, and then the Black Lizard’s underlings began to come, one after another, to view their newly caged guest.

I will leave it to readers to imagine how dreadfully embarrassed Sanae was at their improper attentions; how the young man cursed and shouted at them like a beast; and what lascivious suggestions these criminals offered to her ears. Just as the four or five who had slept there underground were making such a commotion, that Morse-like signal was heard once again. Shortly after, a man who appeared to be a crew member entered the lair in something of a fluster.

The Incident of the Dolls

The seaman was one of the Black Lizard's men who slept in the steamer moored out in the bay. He approached the private chambers of the leader of the gang, deep underground, and knocked on the door with the same code-like tapping.

'Enter!'

Even among such a group of disreputable men, her authority as the boss of the gang freed her of the need to do anything so undignified as locking her door. At any time, even the middle of the night, the door could be opened freely at her simple command.

'My goodness! What in the world is the problem, and so early in the morning? It's still only six, isn't it?'

With no regard for decorum, she lay face-down on the white bed wearing only white silk pyjamas and she lit up a cigar while watching the seaman out of the corner of her eye. Her rich curves were revealed by the sheer white silk. Her men had no difficulties with their boss dressing like that, though ...

'Something a little strange has happened. I thought you should know right away.' The man fidgeted, trying to avoid looking at the bed.

'Strange? How?'

'It's Matsu, the stoker. He vanished last night. We searched the whole ship, and he ain't there. He ain't the type to run off, and I thought maybe he'd got caught ashore. Little worried 'bout that ...'

'Hmm. So you let Matsu go ashore?'

'No, Ma'am! No way! But after Jun'ichi returned to the ship, he came ashore one more time, right? Matsu was one of the rowers, and when the boat got back he weren't in it any more. We figured we must'a made a mistake, and searched the whole ship, then came back here and asked, but the guys said Matsu never showed up. Maybe he was off wandering in town and got picked up by the cops, huh?'

‘Not good at all ... Matsu is a little slow upstairs, and really can’t be depended on to do anything complicated – which is why he’s the stoker. But if he’s been arrested, he certainly could spill a few secrets ...’

She sat up on the bed, her brow furrowed as she thought of what to do, but just then another strange message was delivered.

The door burst open and three of her men looked in, then one explained rapidly.

‘M’lady, please come and have a look! Something very strange is going on! The dolls are wearing clothes! And they’re covered in jewels, glittering something fierce! We checked around to see who’d play such a bad joke, but nobody knows anything. Surely it wasn’t you?’

‘You’re joking!’

‘No. Jun’ichi was so surprised he’s still standing there, gawking.’

Strange, indeed unimaginable things were happening. Who knew what connection might exist between Matsu’s disappearance and this new event, but it seemed unusual that the two things should happen at the same time! The queen of this underground realm could not remain calm any longer. She evicted them all from her room, changed quickly into her usual black Western-style garb, and hurried to the doll showroom.

It was as if imps had been at work ... The upright young black man had donned a khaki uniform that would not look out of place on a beggar, but on his chest the giant ‘Star of Egypt’ flashed proudly like a medal of honour; the seated blonde girl, elbows propped on her knees, now wore the long-sleeved kimono of a Japanese girl, and bracelets and anklets made of diamond pins and pearl necklaces. The reclining Japanese woman had an old blanket wrapped around her torso, but smiled under a diadem, formed from many jewels, lying on her raven locks; and the discus thrower, the young Japanese man, now had on a grimy knit shirt, with glittering necklaces and bracelets.

Standing there, still looking into Amamiya Jun’ichi’s eyes, she was so astonished she could not speak for a moment.

What a joke to play! The long-sleeved kimono was the one that Sanae had been wearing the night before, but the other pieces of clothing were all from her underlings. Someone had taken them from their shelves or wicker baskets in the bedrooms, and dressed the mannequins. The jewellery, of course, was from the Black Lizard’s display cases, leaving most of the glass cases empty.

‘Who in the world would have done such a silly thing ...’

‘Nobody knows! There are five men here besides me, and we’ve all proven ourselves. I’ve asked them all, and they all swear they had nothing to do with it!’

‘What about the watchman at the gate?’

‘He says nothing out of the ordinary happened at all. And even if some outsider tried to get in, that trapdoor can only be opened from the inside ... It just isn’t possible for a trickster to get in from the outside!’

After their brief and fruitless conversation the pair fell silent again, and looked at each other. As if at a sudden thought, the Black Lizard muttered ‘No! Could it be ...?’ as she ran to the cage where her ‘guests’ were imprisoned. She examined the lock closely, but there was no sign that it had been broken.

‘Has one of you children been playing with this? Tell me the truth! One of you played this trick on me, right?’

She called to them, voice shrill. Inside the cage, Adam and Eve had been whispering together, facing each other, but at her sudden attack each of them braced defensively. Sanae once again curled up into the corner like a monkey, and the young man stood up abruptly and approached the kidnapper, fists ready.

‘Why don’t you answer? You did it, didn’t you? Dressed my dolls!’

‘Damn fool! You can see I’m imprisoned in this cage! Are you totally insane?’

His entire body was filled with fury as he shouted his reply.

‘Oh, you’re still full of pride, I see! Well, as long as it wasn’t you who did it, it doesn’t really matter, because I have plans of my own. By the way, how do you like our little miss?’

For some reason, the Black Lizard changed the subject. The young man stood silent, and she asked once more. ‘I asked you if you liked her.’

He exchanged a quick glance with Sanae, huddled in the corner, then he shouted out ‘Yes, I like her! I like her, and because I like her, I’ll protect her! I won’t let you lay one finger on her!’

‘Oh, I thought it might be something like that,’ she chortled. ‘Well, you go right ahead and protect her.’

Still snickering, she turned and saw that Amamiya Jun’ichi, clad in overalls, had just arrived.

‘Jun-chan, pull that girl out of there and dump her in the tank,’ she commanded sharply, handing Jun’ichi the key.

‘Isn’t it a bit too soon? She’s only been here one night,’ commented

Jun'ichi, looking to see her reaction as he spoke through his huge false moustache.

'It doesn't matter. This is hardly the first time I've decided things on the spur of the moment. Go ahead and take care of her now ... I'll be in my room, eating breakfast. I want you to get everything ready. And make sure they return all those jewels to their display cases. Got it?'

The Black Lizard walked back toward her room, not even turning to face Jun'ichi as she spoke.

She was furious. The bizarre prank with the mannequins had upset her very much, and when she saw her two captives whispering to each other in the cage so harmoniously it had been the final straw, and her fury burst.

She'd had no intention of providing Sanae as a bride-to-be: she only wanted to frighten her, to shame her, to enjoy her terrified and sad state in the cell. But her plans had gone totally awry, with the young man determined to protect Sanae by force, while Sanae had looked up at him with delight and indescribable appreciation in her eyes! It was not hard to understand why the Black Lizard burned with a foul displeasure, much like jealousy.

Faced with a difficult job, Jun'ichi hesitated for a moment, and then, no other choice available, approached the cage door.

'You swine! What do you think you're going to do to this girl?'

Inside the cage, the young man had adopted a fighting stance, with a fearsome expression suggesting he would kill Jun'ichi on the spot if he tried to step inside. However, Jun'ichi had a few fights of his own under his belt and he remained unimpressed as he stood at the door. He inserted the key and rattled it around a little, then suddenly swung the door open and leaped inside.

The two of them – a moustachioed man in factory garb, and a naked youth – grappled each other's arms furiously.

'Not a chance! As long as I'm alive you'll not touch this girl. Go ahead and try! But before you do, you'd better be prepared to be throttled to death!'

His hands, driven by his fury, grew ever closer to Jun'ichi's neck.

And, astonishing as it was, Jun'ichi made no effort to resist them! Still holding the other's arms, he thrust his neck forward, and brought his head close to the young man's ear, whispering something.

At first the youth shook his head, determined not to listen, but then an expression of sheer wonder swept across his face. At the same time, he suddenly grew quiet, dropping his hands from the other's neck to

hang at his sides.

Doppelgänger

A short while after having somehow persuaded the young man in the cage to quiet down, Amamiya Jun'ichi took the naked damsel – who seemed numbed out of her wits – under his arm and went to the front of the glass-lined tank. There was an upright ladder on the side of the tank. Holding Sanae, he climbed to the top rung, lifted the steel-plate cover and threw her body in. After closing the cover and descending the ladder, he went to the Black Lizard's private quarters, opened the door slightly and said,

‘My Lady, I’ve carried out your instructions as commanded. Sanae-san is swimming about inside the tank now. Hurry and take a look!’

Next he went to a seat at the side of the tank, took a small folded sheet of newspaper from his overall pocket, opened it, and placed it carefully on the seat. Then, for some reason, he quickly moved off to the other side of the passage.

From the opposite direction, the woman in black opened the door and stalked to the front of the tank.

On the other side of the glass plate, the bluish water swayed violently. The different-sized fronds of seaweed rearing up like serpents from the bottom were also moving wildly to and fro.

And among them, swimming with a flailing action, a naked woman ... the phantasm Sanae had seen the night before had become reality.

The woman in black stared at the tank, eyes shining cruelly, pale cheeks twitching strangely with excitement. Both her fists were tightly clenched and she was gritting her teeth. Then she noticed that the naked woman was not moving as vigorously as usual. It was not just a question of degree – the naked woman was not flailing at all. It was the swaying water that made it look that way. She realized that the young woman's white body was simply moving with the water.

Had the frail Sanae fainted before entering the tank, thus avoiding

the agony of being under water? It seemed not. As the Black Lizard watched, the body of the woman in the tank gradually revolved and the face, which had been turned away, now appeared at the front glass. Wait a minute! Was this Sanae's face? Yet submersion could not have altered it thus. Oh, but now it became clear. Wasn't this the taxidermist's model of the Japanese girl from the display case? But how on earth could such a slip-up have taken place?

'Is there anyone there? Where did Jun-chan go?'

Forgetting herself, the woman in black was shouting at the top of her lungs. Her minions came thronging in from where the stuffed mannequins were exhibited. Their ashen look suggested something had affected them too.

One of the men reported in a panic.

'M'lady, something strange has happened again. One of the dolls is missing. It was there when I took off the clothes and collected the jewels a moment ago, but when I looked just now, the girl, you know the one that's lying down ... she's missing.'

But the woman in black was already aware of this.

'Did you look inside the cage? Was Sanae still there?'

'No, there's just the man. Didn't Jun-chan throw Sanae-san into the tank?'

'Well, something was slung in, but not Sanae-san. Here, look closely. It's the stuffed figure you lot are searching for!'

The men peered into the tank. Indeed, the object there in the water was definitely the mannequin that had disappeared.

'That's queer! Who's gone and done that?!'

'Jun-chan. Have you lot seen Jun-chan? He was here just a minute ago.'

'We haven't seen him. He's been very irritable today. It was as though we were hindering him somehow: he kept telling us to get out of the way.'

'Mmn. This is peculiar. But where did he go? He couldn't have gone outside so I want you all to search thoroughly for him. If you find him, tell him to come straight to me.'

After the men had withdrawn, the woman in black seemed somewhat concerned for she stared into space pondering.

What could this all be about? The ship's stoker goes missing. Then something strange happens to the mounted figures. Now the woman that should have been Sanae-san is suddenly transformed into one of the mannequins. Could there be some connection between these

uncanny events? It all seemed a little too coincidental.

She felt that an awesome power beyond human abilities was at work. Just what could that be? But wait! What if ...? No, that was too silly to fit in. There was absolutely no way it could be that.

The woman in black did her best to repress the overwhelming ghostly presentiment that rose up within her breast. Yet woman thief though she was, so great was her fear that cold clammy sweat drenched her entire body.

After a while, she made to sit down in a nearby chair, when she noticed a sheet of newspaper lying on the seat. This was the sheet that Amamiya Jun'ichi had earlier unfolded and placed there for some reason.

At first, she looked at the newspaper article without much interest, but soon her expression became very intent and her eyes were drawn to it.

'SUPER-SLEUTH AKECHI'S VICTORY – IWASE SANAE RETURNS HOME SAFE – FAMILY OF JEWEL KING REJOICES'

The lady thief's attention was captured by the unbelievable message splashed out in large headlines across three columns. Hurriedly, she picked up the newspaper, sat down and began to read the article avidly. The outline of the article was as follows.

'On the afternoon of the 7th, Iwase Sanae, beloved daughter of jewel "king" Iwase Shōbei, returned to the family residence after apparently having been abducted by that bizarre villain the Black Lizard. As our enquiries suggested that Mr Iwase had delivered a magnificent gem known as the Star of Egypt to the thief in ransom for his daughter, we believed that the criminal had kept her promise and sent back Miss Iwase. This was your correspondent's understanding when he interviewed Mr Iwase and his daughter. However, both these persons state that it was entirely due to the efforts of private detective Akechi Kogorō and that the criminal had definitely not honoured the agreement. Somewhat unusually, we were asked to refrain from probing too deeply because of certain circumstances that apparently make it impossible to provide details. Where can that villain the Black Lizard be hiding? The detective in question, Mr Akechi, is now in lone pursuit of the Black Lizard and his whereabouts are unknown. Who, we wonder, will emerge victorious from the combat now taking place between the famous detective and the master thief? Will the magnificent Star of Egypt return to the possession of Mr Iwase? We wait with the utmost concern for the next piece of news.'

There was also a large photograph captioned 'Father and Daughter Rejoice', which clearly showed the smiling Iwase and Sanae sitting on a sofa in a drawing room.

After the woman thief had read this newspaper article – as improbable as a ghost story – and looked at the photograph, a rare expression of surprise crossed her beautiful face. More than surprise, it was a look of indefinable fear. This was a major Osaka newspaper marked with yesterday's date. The '7th' mentioned in the article was two days ago, the day when the Black Lizard's steamer travelled across Osaka Bay. On that day, Sanae was in the ship. And yesterday and today – right up to a little while ago – she had been trembling inside the cage.

What was this all about? Surely a leading newspaper like this would not print a mistaken article. And more convincing than anything was the photograph. How could Sanae have been laughing in a seat at the Iwase home in an Osaka suburb when she was supposed to be a captive on the ship?

Not even the wily woman in black could solve this bizarre mystery. For the first time in her life, she found herself crushed by an unnameable fear. Her face was pale as death and her brow sopping with beads of clammy sweat.

For some reason the disquieting word *doppelgänger* floated into her head. The improbable tradition went that one person could become two and the two could act independently. She remembered reading about it somewhere on a candy wrapper. And she had seen it in an overseas magazine on the paranormal. The practical woman in black was definitely not a believer in supernatural phenomena, but now she seemed to have no option but to believe in the unbelievable.

At that moment the men who had been searching for Jun'ichi came thronging back to report that they had not found him.

'Who's on guard duty at the entrance now?'

The woman in black's voice lacked power.

'Kitamura. He says no one has passed him. And he can be trusted.'

'All right. So he's got to be inside then. He can't have just disappeared in a puff of smoke. I want you to search once more very carefully. And for Sanae too. If this thing in the tank isn't her, then she has to be hiding somewhere.'

Although the men stared uneasily at the pale face of their chieftainess, they grumblingly made to withdraw down the passage.

'Hang on! Two of you stay here and get that doll out of the tank. I

want you to search it thoroughly just in case.'

The two men who stayed behind climbed the ladder, took the mannequin from the water and lowered it down to the floor where they laid it out at full length. However, although they checked the limp doll very carefully, they could find no clue to the mystery other than that it was not Sanae.

The woman in black strutted about angrily, then sat down on the chair again and started to read the newspaper story once more. As many times as she read it, the result was the same. Sanae had split in two. There was no doubting that it was Sanae's face in the photograph.

Suddenly, from behind her seat, a voice said 'My Lady.'

The woman in black looked back in surprise, but when she saw the man she said, scolding, 'Oh, Jun-chan. Where have you been? And how do you explain this business? Throwing in a doll instead of Sanae-san! I think your prank has gone a little too far, don't you?'

But Jun'ichi just stood there stock-still without saying a word. He looked at the woman in black with a teasing smile on his face.

The Impostor

‘Why don’t you speak? Something’s happened, hasn’t it? You seem different. What’s wrong? Or are you rebelling against me?’

In response to Jun’ichi’s extremely bold manner, the woman in black unconsciously raised her voice. Or perhaps it was because she had finally lost her temper due to the numberless odd things that had happened up to now.

‘Where is Sanae-san? Or are you going to tell me that you don’t know?’

‘That’s right. I haven’t the slightest idea. I’d guess she’d be in the cage, wouldn’t she?’

At last, Jun-chan had answered. But his manner of speaking was very unfriendly.

‘In the cage? But you took her out, didn’t you?’

‘Well, I wouldn’t know about that. What say we have a look?’

Having flung out this remark, Jun’ichi nonchalantly strolled off. It seemed as though he really intended to check the cage. Had he taken leave of his senses? Perhaps there was another reason. Very worried now, the woman in black followed Jun-chan, monitoring his behaviour all the while.

When they came before the iron bars of the cage, they saw that the key had been left in the lock.

‘You left the key in the lock! There’s really something strange going on with you today.’

While muttering this, she peered into the gloomy cage.

‘Look! She’s not here, is she!’

There was just the naked man squatting in the far corner. For some reason, he seemed completely listless today, his head limply drooping. Maybe he was sleeping.

As if talking to himself, Jun-chan said ‘Let’s ask him,’ pulled open

the iron-barred gate and walked into the cage. It really seemed that everything he did was out of the ordinary.

‘Hey, Kagawa-san, do you know where Sanae-san is?’

The handsome youth in the cage was called Kagawa.

‘Hey there, Kagawa-san! Are you asleep? Wake up, would you?’

As he made no reply to these questions, Jun’ichi put his hand on the well-formed youth’s shoulder and shook him. But Kagawa’s body just wobbled back and forth without the least resistance.

‘This is very strange, my lady. I wonder if he’s dead.’

The woman in black was transfixed by an alarming presentiment. What on earth had happened?

‘Surely he hasn’t killed himself, has he?’

She entered the cage and approached Kagawa.

‘Lift up his face and let me see.’

‘Like this, you mean?’

Jun-chan put his hand on the handsome youth’s jaw and swivelled up the drooping face.

‘Aa–! The face!’

Not even the Black Lizard could prevent herself from letting out a scream and stumbling back.

A nightmare. She must be having a nightmare.

The man squatting in the corner was not the handsome young Kagawa. Yet again, a person had been ‘replaced’ in an inexplicable manner. So, who exactly was this?

The woman in black was beset with a maddening disquiet. If there was some psychological malaise that made one person appear to be two, then perhaps she was affected by this condition.

The face that Jun’ichi had swivelled upward was the face of – Jun’ichi! Jun-chan had doubled. There was the completely naked Jun-chan and the Jun-chan dressed in a workman’s clothes and wearing a beard. There was no other explanation than that a fantastic invisible mirror was reflecting one person as two. But which was the real body and which the reflection?

Sanae-san had ‘split’ into two earlier with the newspaper photograph. This time it was an actual body. And the faces of the two Jun-chans were right before her.

Such a crazy thing could not really have happened. There must be some prodigious trick lurking here. But who on earth could have conceived of this incredible trick? And to what purpose?

Infuriatingly, the Jun-chan with the bushy beard was smiling

derisively at the bewildered woman in black like some apparition. What was he laughing at? Should he not be shocked himself? But he was uncaringly leering away as if he had lost his senses.

Continuing to laugh, this Jun-chan again shook the naked one violently. Finally, the shaken Jun-chan made a strange sound and his eyes suddenly opened.

‘Oh so you’ve finally come to, have you? Come on, get a grip on yourself. What were you doing in this place?’

The Jun-chan in worker’s clothes again spoke in a most peculiar way.

For a time, the naked Jun-chan appeared not to know what was going on. He opened and closed his sleepy eyes, but when he saw the woman in black standing before him it was as if he had sniffed smelling salts for he quickly recovered his senses.

‘M’lady, I’ve had a terrible time ... Hah! It’s him. This blackguard.’

Looking at the overall-clad Jun-chan, the seated Jun-chan jabbered madly. Then the Jun-chans locked together and a fierce struggle ensued.

However, the nightmarish contest did not last long. In an instant, the naked man was thrown onto the concrete floor.

‘You bounder! You bounder! How dare you pretend to be me, you swine! M’lady, be careful. He’s an impostor! It’s Matsu in disguise. It’s the stoker Matsu.’ The naked Jun-chan yelled out from the floor where he lay flat out after having been thrown.

‘Hey, you there. I’ll have to ask you to put up your hands and just remain quiet while I listen to what Jun-chan has to say.’

Realizing that the situation would not be resolved simply, the woman in black had quickly grasped her pistol and pointed it at the Jun-chan clad in working clothes. Her voice was kind, but the extent of her determination could be gauged by the hue of her flashing eyes.

The man wearing the overalls obediently raised both hands, but the leer remained on his face. There was something weird about the fellow.

‘All right, Jun-chan. Tell me your story. What exactly is going on here?’

Suddenly embarrassed by his nudity, Jun-chan coiled himself up and then began to speak.

‘You know that after everyone came here last night I went back out to the steamer by myself. It must have been then. Having finished doing what I had to do on the ship, I came back to land on the boat –

and who do you think had sneaked along with me in the darkness but this fellow, Matsu, the stoker? I bawled him out in no uncertain terms, but then the bounder suddenly came flying at me.

‘I had no idea that the blockhead was so strong. He started really laying in to me. I took some telling blows and finally lost consciousness. I don’t know how long after that it was, but when I came to I was lying in one of the storerooms here with my hands and legs tied and without a stitch of clothing on. I tried to shout out but it was no good because I’d been gagged. I was scrabbling to get out when he came into the storeroom. Then I saw he was wearing my working clothes. And he must be an expert in disguise or something because he was also wearing a false beard. His face looked exactly like mine.

‘Aha, I thought, he’s made himself look like me because he’s got some plot in mind. I realized he was a deceptive villain but I couldn’t do anything because I was all tied up. Then, the scoundrel says to me “just put up with it a little longer” and lands me another knockout blow. I’m ashamed to say it, but I lost consciousness again. The next thing was when I came to just now.

‘You’re going to get yours now, Matsu! With things this way, looks like you’ve run out of luck. You can enjoy the wait until I take my full revenge on you.’

After Jun-chan had finished talking, the woman in black suppressed a strong feeling of disquiet and laughed with apparent pleasure.

‘You are a deep one, aren’t you Matsu? I had no idea you were such a villain. I congratulate you. So, you’ve been behind all these strange goings-on from the start, right? You threw the dummy into the tank and dressed up the mannequins with all that strange garb. But what possible purpose could you have for doing that? It doesn’t matter now, so you might as well tell me. Hey, stop leering and answer me, would you?’

The man in the work clothes asked teasingly, ‘And if I don’t answer, what do you intend to do?’

‘Kill you. It seems you don’t know your boss’s character yet. She likes nothing better than the sight of blood.’

‘So you mean that you’re going to let me have it with that pistol? Ha, ha, ha.’

The insolent fellow laughed loudly.

At some stage he had lowered both his hands, both of which were now thrust nonchalantly in his pockets.

The woman in black gnashed her teeth at such an unthinkable insult

from one of her underlings.

She could endure no more.

‘Laugh at me, do you? Here, take this!’

No sooner had she shouted this than she levelled the pistol and pulled the trigger.

Another Doll Incident

Did the man in work clothes lose his life immediately after hearing this trite gibe? Why no, of course not. He stood there with his hands thrust into his pockets laughing with evident pleasure.

The trigger was pulled, but it simply clicked without firing.

'I say, that made an odd sound, don't you think? Perhaps there's something awry with your pistol?'

The derisive laughter infuriated the woman in black. She pulled the trigger again and again in quick succession but there was only the hollow clicking sound.

'You scoundrel! You took the bullets out, didn't you?'

'Oh so you've finally twigged, have you? It is indeed as you say. Look here.'

Taking his right hand from the pocket, he opened it to reveal several small bullets snuggled cutely like little marbles in his palm.

Just then, there was a loud sound of footsteps outside the cage and the Black Lizard's rowdy minions came rushing in.

'My lady, we've got a problem. It's Kitamura. He was supposed to be guarding the entrance, but he's been tied up!'

'And he's out like a light!'

Matsu must have done this too. But why tie up just Kitamura and leave the rest alone? Maybe there was a special reason for it.

'Hey, who in the name of creation is he?'

The men's eyes were full of surprise when they realized there were two 'Jun'ichis'.

'It's Matsu the stoker. We've found out that he's the one behind everything. Hurry up and pin him down.'

Heartened by these reinforcements, the woman in black spoke loudly.

'What's that? Matsu? You swine you. How dare you do such a thing!'

The men stampeded into the cage and made to seize the man in the working clothes. But what speed Matsu had! Dodging beneath the clutching hands of the advancing group, he had in an instant dashed outside the cage. Then, while gradually backing away, the grinning figure beckoned with his hand as if saying 'come here'. What unfathomable audacity!

As if hypnotized, the woman in black and her rough henchmen moved out of the cage and edged after him.

What a peculiar procession! The pursued backing off along the concrete-walled subterranean passage, while the pursuers slowly moved directly toward their hated foe with their hairy arms raised in a boxer's pose.

Eventually the strange cavalcade reached the front of the stuffed doll display, where Matsu abruptly stood still.

'Hey you lot! Do you know why Kitamura is tied up?'

Of course, his hands were stuck nonchalantly in his pockets when he launched the odd question.

'Let me through there! I want to ask him some questions.'

It seemed the woman in black had thought of something, for she pushed her way to the head of the group and approached Matsu.

'If you are Matsu, I apologize with all sincerity for having underestimated you. But are you really Matsu? The more I think about it, the less I believe it. You're not Matsu at all, are you? And if that's the case, do me the favour of taking off that damnable false beard, would you? Take of those whiskers please.'

Pitiful though it was, she seemed to be pleading with him.

'Ha, ha, ha. You already know, even without my removing my beard. You know, but you are scared to say my name, aren't you? Your pale face is proof of what I say – you look as though you've seen a ghost!'

It seemed that the man in working clothes was not Matsu. And he no longer spoke like some lowly thief. What was more, there seemed something familiar about the tone of that articulate voice. Such was the violence of her emotion that the woman in black could not prevent a shudder from coursing through her body.

'All right, then, so you are ...'

'Oh there's no need for reserve. Why do you hesitate? Out with it then, what's the rest of the sentence?'

The man in the working clothes was no longer laughing. His overall bearing gave an impression of seriousness. The woman in black felt

cold beads of perspiration slowly flowing down under her armpits.

‘Akechi Kogorō ... you are Akechi Kogorō, aren’t you?’

She felt better after managing to say it.

‘That’s right. You realized a long while ago, didn’t you? You knew, but you suppressed the thought out of cowardice.’

As he said this, the man in working clothes peeled off his beard. Though made up to look like Jun-chan, the face that emerged was unmistakably that of Akechi Kogorō, the much-missed Akechi Kogorō.

‘But why? How can this be?’

‘You mean how was I rescued after having been slung into the middle of the Enshū Sea? Ha, ha, ha. You thought you were ditching me into the sea then, didn’t you? But there was a fundamental misapprehension there. You see, I wasn’t trapped inside that sofa – it was poor old Matsu. In order to carry on with my investigations, I decided to disguise myself as the stoker. After tying him up and gagging him I put him in the ideal hiding place – the human chair. Little did I think it would end up like that. I am truly sorry that he met such a tragic fate.’

‘Oh. So that was Matsu, you say? And then you disguised yourself as him and stayed in the engine room all the time. Is that correct?’

Somehow the woman thief’s words had lost their venom and taken on the dulcet tones of a lady of class.

‘Can it really be so, I wonder? But if Matsu had been gagged, how could he have spoken as he did? For after all, the two of us held a long conversation through the sofa’s fabric, didn’t we?’

‘It was me that was speaking.’

‘But how could ...’

‘There’s a large closet in that cabin. I hid inside and spoke from there. To you, it sounded as though the voice came from inside the sofa. As there was someone wriggling around within it at the time, your misapprehension was understandable.’

‘In that case, then, it was you that hid Sanae-san away somewhere? And put that clipping from the Osaka newspaper on the chair?’

‘Indeed it was.’

‘Well, very elaborate I must say. So, just to get at me you took the trouble of forging a newspaper?’

‘Forging? Don’t talk such rot! How could I fake a newspaper at the drop of a hat? The story and the photo are both genuine.’

‘Oh really! I mean, it’s silly to say that Sanae-san has a double?’

‘There’s no double. The “Sanae” that you kidnapped and brought

here was an impostor. If you only knew the difficulty I had in finding her lookalike. Of course, I was confident that I could rescue her unharmed, but I was unwilling to expose the only child of a friend to such danger. The girl you took to be Sanae was Sakurayama Yōko, an orphan all alone in the world. What's more, she is a modern girl of somewhat dubious morals. This was precisely why she was able to play her role in this grand drama so well. Even though she found herself in such a pickle, she had the guts to endure it all. Despite all the tears and wailing, she believed in me. She was certain that I would save her.'

Readers will doubtless recall a chapter earlier in our tale entitled 'The Strange Old Man'. It was then that master detective Akechi Kogorō carried out his feat of deception. For the unusual elderly man was none other than Akechi in disguise. From that evening, the real Sanae was concealed in a location known only by the private eye and her place was taken by Sakurayama Yōko, who entered the Iwase household and pretended to be Sanae. Starting the following day, 'Sanae' kept herself to her room, seemingly loath to show her face even to those in the house. Assuming that she had succumbed to some sort of depression as a result of the Black Lizard's barrage of blackmail, her mother and father were not in the slightest bit suspicious that she might be an impostor. Yōko's acting abilities were already outstanding at this stage.

Listening to the super sleuth's tale of how he had countered surprise with surprise, the Black Lizard acknowledged from the core of her being her arch-enemy's superiority. She even felt a deep-seated sense of veneration for this most mysterious great character. However, the veneration was certainly not shared by her ignorant and uncouth underlings. Indeed, they felt an infinite hatred and bitterness toward this rogue and enemy who had completely outdone their leader and sent their comrade Matsu to a watery grave.

They had listened impatiently to the long story, but when they sensed a lull in the to and fro of question and answer they could endure no longer.

'Enough of this! Let's do him in!'

One man's cry sparked the rest and all four burly men leapt toward the lone, unaided detective. Not even the fearsome mastery of the villainess could have prevailed against such force.

One tried to throttle him from behind, another twisted up his arms, and yet another grabbed his legs and sought to topple him. There was no resisting such a deadly, crazed adversary – even for Akechi Kogorō.

Things looked bad, very bad. Having struggled so hard to reach this point, was there no way for him to turn the tables at the very last? Or would the greatest detective of the age lose his life to a gang of thugs?

But strangely, in the thick of the uproar, there echoed a surprisingly cheerful laugh. And surely this was the laugh of Akechi Kogorō, who was now being pressed down by the four men. What could it all mean?

‘Ha, ha, ha! Don’t you lot have eyes? You’d better look closely. Hey, take a good look inside the case.’

This presumably meant the glass case like a show window displaying the stuffed human figures.

Without thinking, they all looked in that direction. They were completely unaware of what had happened inside the glass case – partly due to the tumult of the fight and partly because the display was away at an angle from the fray and thus difficult to see.

But now that they looked inside the case, they saw that an astonishing change had occurred. Every one of the dolls wore a man’s coat. All in their original positions, the male and the female figures were now dressed in stiff, serious-looking men’s jackets.

Of course, this must be Akechi’s handiwork, but how tiresome to carry out such mischief not once but twice! Wait a minute though. Surely Akechi would not play a meaningless prank. Might this weird changing of attires portend something astounding?

Naturally, the woman in black was the first to realize what it was. ‘Oh no!’

Amazingly, and before anyone could think of fleeing, the dolls stirred into life and stood up. It was not only the clothes that had changed, the insides had also been replaced with something completely different. These were not stuffed figures but live human beings who had posed like dolls, waiting for the right time to come. And look! Without exception, every one of the jacket-clad men was gripping a pistol and the muzzles were pointed toward the woman thief and her underlings.

At that instant, there came a loud crashing sound and a gaping hole appeared in the show window. Then, from the opening the men in jackets came flying out.

‘Black Lizard, you’re under arrest! Come quietly!’

The fearsome order used down through the ages rang out. This effective command is used surprisingly frequently by the modern constabulary. Naturally, the men in coats were a taskforce of able police detectives who had infiltrated the underground lair with

Akechi's guidance.

When the private eye asked earlier on why only Kitamura, the man on watch at the entrance, had been tied up, he was hinting at the arrival of the police in support. The signal for them to open the entrance came when Akechi telephoned the police headquarters, enabling the detectives to make their way underground without a hitch. When they came in, they dealt with the watchman. Of course, Akechi was helping from inside. That was when Jun-chan went missing just a while ago. But why did they not arrest the Black Lizard immediately? This was Akechi's stratagem to heighten the effect of the capture. After all, detectives are not complete bores without a sense of humour.

Naturally, another team had enlisted the co-operation of the harbour police and gone to the pirate vessel out at sea. By now, every one of the Black Lizard's underlings – and the steamer itself – would have been taken into custody.

The pirate crew here underground all quickly lowered their heads before the officers' pistols. Fierce though the rough band was, there was nothing the men could do to oppose this nightmarish surprise attack, and they were all tied up, including the stark naked Jun-chan. However, their leader was more nimble. Having quickly perceived why the dolls were wearing coats, the Black Lizard ran away rapidly, eluding the clutching arms of the detectives and flying like a bird down the passage into her private room where she locked the door shut.

The Black Lizard Writhes

The woman in black could not withstand this ultimate insult to her pride as queen of the underworld. Though her fate was unavoidable, the Black Lizard surely intended to lock herself into her secret chamber and end her life in dignity. When Akechi Kogorō realized that, he slipped away from the commotion of the arrests, and raced alone to her chamber.

‘Open up! It’s me, Akechi! I have something I must say to you! Please, open the door!’

In response to his shouting came a weak reply: ‘Akechi-san. If it’s you alone ...’

‘Yes, just me. Open it, hurry!’

He heard the key turn in the keyhole, and the door opened.

‘Ah! I was late! You’ve already taken poison, haven’t you?’ he shouted as soon as he stepped inside. The woman in black had collapsed after barely managing to open the door for him.

Akechi dropped to his knees, and cradled the upper half of her body on his lap, hoping to at least soothe some of her dying agonies.

‘There’s nothing to say now; it’s all too late. Sleep in peace. Because of you, I faced mortal danger, but it has been a valuable experience ... it is, after all, my profession. I don’t hate you. Quite the opposite: I pity you ... ah, yes, there was something I had to tell you. The item that you worked so hard to obtain for your collection, Iwase-san’s Star of Egypt, I will take home with me. To return it to its rightful owner, of course.’

He withdrew the huge jewel from his pocket, and suspended it in front of the thief’s eyes. The Black Lizard forced a weak smile, and nodded two, three times.

‘What about Sanae-san?’ she asked, gently.

‘Sanae-san? Oh, you mean Sakurayama Yōko. Rest assured, she has

already left this hole together with Kagawa, and is safe in the hands of the police. She had a tough time of it down here. When I get back to Osaka, I plan to make sure that Iwase-san repays her for her trouble.'

'I've lost to you. I've lost completely.'

She had not merely lost at battle. Indicating without words that she also meant her defeat at something totally different, she began to weep, the tears overflowing from her half-closed eyes.

'You're holding me in your arms, aren't you ... I'm so happy ... I had never imagined I could have such a fortunate death.'

Akechi understood what she was saying, and felt his own breast fill with a strange emotion, although it was not one that he could express in words.

The confession of the dying Black Lizard was mysterious indeed. Had she been in love with her mortal enemy Akechi Kogorō without being aware of it? And had that been why she had cried, so full of terrible sadness, when she thought she had buried him in the midnight sea?

'Goodbye, Akechi! Can you grant me a dying wish? Kiss me ...'

Her limbs were already shaking. This was the end. And though she may have been a criminal, he could not refuse her this last, dying request.

Silent, Akechi Kogorō softly pressed his lips to her already-cold brow. He kissed the forehead of the murderess who had tried to kill him. She smiled with happiness, from the heart, and with that smile still on her face, she stopped moving.

The detectives, finished with their arrests, came charging up the corridor, and stood transfixed in the doorway when they saw that strange scene. Even these detectives, known as cold-hearted men, had emotions. Stricken to silence by the solemnity they faced, they lost, for a moment, even the power of speech.

The incredible Black Lizard, the woman thief of the age who had shaken society to its roots, was gone. She had passed from this world with a faint smile on her face, lying with her head pillowed on the knees of the famous detective Akechi Kogorō.

But look at the sleeves of her black garb! She must have torn them while fleeing from the police only minutes before. Her beautiful arms were exposed, and the black lizard tattoo that was the source of her nickname seemed to writhe ever so slightly like a living creature desolate at the death of its mistress.



THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING

Find us online and join the conversation

Follow us on Twitter twitter.com/penguinukbooks

Like us on Facebook facebook.com/penguinbooks

Share the love on Instagram instagram.com/penguinukbooks

Watch our authors on YouTube youtube.com/penguinbooks

Pin Penguin books to your Pinterest pinterest.com/penguinukbooks

Listen to audiobook clips at soundcloud.com/penguin-books

Find out more about the author and discover
your next read at penguin.co.uk

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
New Zealand | India | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

This translation first published by Kurodahan Press 2006

This edition published in 2023

Translation copyright © Ian Hughes, 2006

Cover design: Matthew Young

ISBN: 978-1-802-06319-6

This ebook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorized distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Footnote

13: The Magician's Strange Trick

[fn1](#)

The reader will find this story, by a certain Mr Edogawa Rampo, in the collection *Japanese Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1956).